

Challenging the Precepts of Modernism: The Late Work of J. F. Willumsen

Anne Gregersen

Editing and peer review managed by:

Mikael Bøgh Rasmussen, The Danish National Art Library, Copenhagen

Reviewers:

Eva Badura-Triska, Anneli Fuchs

Abstract

The late work of the Danish artist J. F. Willumsen (1863-1958) has until recently largely been marginalized and deemed kitsch, of poor quality and "odd". As opposed to the canonization of his earlier work, the period 1930-1958 has been difficult to "digest" and increasingly written off in Danish art history. This article takes a closer look at the late work, the reception of it by Willumsen's contemporaries and the artist's own claims about it. Furthermore, the article proposes to relate the status of the work to its resistance to notions that have become the precepts of modernism such as progression, irreversibility and defined "isms". The challenging of these notions is also found in the phenomenon of "Bad Painting" that has been presented and genealogized mainly through a number of exhibitions the last years. The article suggests to associate the work to this phenomenon.

Contents

A revaluation of J. F. Willumsen's late "odd" works

Framing the late works

A closer look at form and content in the late works

The reception of the "odd" works

The museum debate

Evaluation of the "odd" works

Willumsen's view of art and art criticism

Feeling versus reflection

The collapse of categories

Willumsen and the narrative of modernism

Bad Painting

The significance of the late works

A revaluation of J. F. Willumsen's late "odd" works

- [1] Not only have the late works of J. F. Willumsen (1863-1958) occupied an isolated position in his oeuvre. They have also been difficult to place in an art-historical narrative of 20th-century art in which "isms" progressively replace each other. This is quite understandable in view of their mould-breaking character: Willumsen's works from the 1930s and onwards depart from a host of modernist dogmas that were established around the time of their genesis and the immediate impression might be that the works are the antithesis of modernism. By virtue of their insistence on the figurative, the late works break with the understanding of the non-figurative as the modernist art par excellence. With their mixture of styles, they question the division of art in well-defined categories.¹ Relating in

¹ The art historian Jens Tang Kristensen is one of the first to seriously have considered these aspects in his article "*Willumsens slør og silhuetter – et kongemord med stil*", in which he demonstrates how attempts have always been made to fit Willumsen into different stylistic categories. There was no reasonable way of doing this with the late works, and this is an obvious

part to a classical tradition, and in part being reminiscent of the style seen in commercials and magazine illustrations of that time they destabilise the distinction between fine art and popular culture.

[2] Overall Willumsen's late works consist of a series of paintings that in a figurative idiom stage and mythologise the artist and his surroundings. Typical of these works, which in recent years have been referred to as "odd" paintings by the J. F. Willumsen Museum, are a number of stylistic features such as skewed proportions, deformed presentations and garish "poster colours". The motifs are autobiographical and anecdotal stories, often played out between two figures, or they might be portraits containing equal parts of the banal and the grotesque. In addition, it is a point that the reception of these works proclaims them to be "odd". Artists, art critics, collectors, museum officials and the public have all contributed to forming the view of these works. And their reception suggests that something quite special is at play here: Not only have they been rejected as works of poor quality, but they have divided opinion and been viewed as disturbed, exaggerated, self-ironical and extreme – and for these reasons either embarrassing or interesting depending on the eyes of the beholder.

[3] In the catalogue accompanying a J. F. Willumsen exhibition in 1959, Sigurd Schultz, then the director of the Willumsen Museum, writes that it would not be a real Willumsen exhibition if it did not include "a problem, an edge on which to knock yourself". Schultz emphasizes that it is the late works that create opposition, and concludes that the exhibition makes you wonder whether the late period has been correctly evaluated:

Were there not even in his latest works values that have not yet been appreciated? It may well be that the future will value his work from that time, or at least parts of it, differently from what we do now.²

[4] Schultz was far-sighted: 50 years later, a major step was taken towards a new evaluation of Willumsen's late, so-called "odd" works. This happened in connection with the exhibition *Et værk uden grænser. J. F. Willumsens maleri "Kongesønnens bryllup". 1888 and 1949 (A Work without Limits. J. F. Willumsen's Painting "The Wedding of the King's Son". 1888 and 1849)*,³ which for the first time included the works that have otherwise been called odd, skewed and unsuccessful on an equal footing with the remainder of

reason for their outsider status in the history of Danish art. Jens Tang Kristensen, "Willumsens slør og silhuetter – et kongemord med stil", in: Anne Gregersen, ed., *Et værk uden grænser. J. F. Willumsens maleri "Kongesønnens bryllup". 1888 og 1949*, J. F. Willumsens Museum, 13.5.2009-3.1.2010, exh. cat., Frederikssund 2009.

² Sigurd Schultz, foreword, in: Christian Dam, ed., *J. F. Willumsen. En samling efterladte arbejder, malerier, akvareller og tegninger*, Århus Kunstgalleri, 3.10.-11.10.1959, exh. cat., 2nd ed., Århus 1959. Sigurd Schultz was an art historian and the director of Thorvaldsens Museum in Copenhagen from 1932 to 1963. From 1957 he was moreover the director of J. F. Willumsens Museum, a post which he occupied until 1973. Schultz's view of art was to a great extent elitist and regressive. At the same time he was one of Willumsen's greatest and most important admirers and defended him in articles, features and books.

³ The J. F. Willumsen Museum, Frederikssund, Denmark, 13.5.2009-3.1.2010.

Willumsen's oeuvre. The genesis of the actual exhibition project also resulted in a fresh look at the painting *The Wedding of the King's Son* (fig. 1), which over a space of 60 years was twice rejected during Willumsen's lifetime. Firstly, in 1888, by the art critic and later director of the National Gallery of Denmark, Karl Madsen, and again in 1949, after Willumsen had modified it extensively. This time actually by the supporters of Willumsen, who thought it would damage the plans of making a museum for the artist to exhibit the work. Subsequently the monumental painting lived in retirement in storerooms, far removed from the canonising spotlight of the exhibition walls.



1 J. F. Willumsen, *The Wedding of the King's Son*, 1888 and 1949, oil on canvas, 162 x 370 cm. The J. F. Willumsen Museum, Frederikssund, inv. nr. 265 (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011)

[5] In extension of the exhibition project relating to *The Wedding of the King's Son*, the J. F. Willumsen Museum has initiated a new reading of the late works with the object of examining whether they contain values that Willumsen's contemporaries failed to see or which we can only see today with the art of the last 60-70 years in mind. In addition, the new reading seeks an understanding of why these works have consistently been overlooked. The starting point of this has been the museum's archives, which contain letters, magazine and newspaper articles as well as Willumsen's notes and which constitute a rich source of understanding of Willumsen's own view of art and his artistic intentions and of the reception accorded to the late works. This archive research has provided a deeper insight into how the works can be related to the remainder of Willumsen's oeuvre and to the narratives that have aimed to define the art of the 20th century.

[6] The new reading is indebted to earlier initiatives incorporating the "odd" works in various ways. A group of artists known as Arme og ben (Arms and Legs)⁴ in 1978 extracted from the storerooms in the J. F. Willumsen Museum several of the works that have been seen as skewed, overwrought and of bad quality and exhibited them along with the group's

⁴ The group consisted of Bjørn Nørgaard, Lene Adler Petersen, Per Kirkeby, Paul Gernes, Erik Hagens, Ursula Reuter Christiansen, Richard Winther and Henning Christiansen. Arme og ben had its offset in the school for experimental art known as the Eks-skole.

own works in the museum.⁵ The exhibition *Enten-Eller (Either-Or)* at Sophienholm 1980-81 focused on parody and irony in Willumsen's trilogy from the 1930s, *Titian Dying*.⁶ In 1992, Kunstforeningen in Copenhagen mounted the exhibition *J. F. Willumsen – den sene periode (J. F. Willumsen – The Late Period)*,⁷ showing many of the "odd" works, and incidentally being the only exhibition in recent times to have been dedicated to the late works, although the works exhibited there were latest from 1943.⁸ With her book *J. F. Willumsen i Europa*,⁹ the art historian Ulla Hjorth made an important contribution in 2006 to research in Willumsen's late works. In this book, she inserts Willumsen in an international context revealing connections between works by artists like Giorgio de Chirico and André Derain and late works of Willumsen that have otherwise been difficult to relate to the art movements of his time. Using the concepts "eclectic expressionism" and "the other modern", Willumsen's works from after 1900 are seen in relation to the classicising styles of the period. In addition, the book presents both the discussions around the establishment of a Willumsen museum and the reception of Willumsen in Denmark in the 1930s to 1950s. Hjorth, however, only discusses a small number of works from the 1940s and onwards, and these are not related to movements, theories and phenomena that were current at that time. So there is still no thorough elucidation of the late works and no explanation as to why they at large were excluded from exhibitions and literature on Willumsen.

[7] As regards both form and content, a new reading puts the late paintings of Willumsen into perspective as works of art that are part of an art-historical narrative, but also sheds light on the way specific paradigms create and establish the artistic styles that ultimately become part of a canon. The new reading is thus of interest for an understanding of Willumsen's art, but also – in a much broader perspective – of the processes and mechanisms that determine how artistic quality and relevance are defined. That is to say – ultimately – how an artist's place is established in the history of art and how cultural inheritance is created.¹⁰

⁵ *Arme og ben på Willumsen*, The J. F. Willumsen Museum, 2.9.-21.10.1978.

⁶ *Enten-Eller*, Sophienholm, Kongens Lyngby, 11.10.1980-25.1.1981.

⁷ 29.8-18.10.1992.

⁸ In addition to the exhibitions in The Free Exhibition while Willumsen was alive, several smaller exhibitions were centred mainly on the late works during the 1960s. These included one in 1966 in the Frederikssund Kunstforening of a "selection of the oil paintings stored in the museum cellar, which have only very rarely been put on public display", as the catalogue has it. *Frederikssund Kunstforening. Forårsudstilling 7-11 April 1966*, Catalogue no. 45, Frederikssund Kunstforening, exh. cat., Frederikssund 1966, unpaginated [1]. In 1967 (19.-27.8.) the art dealer Christian Dam arranged an exhibition in the Århus Kunst Galleri that included some of the late works by Willumsen from the collection owned by Willumsen's mistress Michelle Bourret.

⁹ Ulla Hjorth, *J. F. Willumsen i Europa*, Frederikssund 2006.

¹⁰ On this point, the new reading is related to the art historian Merete Sanderhoff's contribution to an understanding of the writing of art history and the canonisation of art as expressed in the book *Sorte billeder. Kunst og kanon*, Copenhagen 2007.

- [8] In keeping with recent years' revision of the overarching notion, which encompasses the 20th century's artistic "isms", that is to say modernism, the new reading sets off from – and seeks to contribute to – an expanded understanding of what modern art is. In contrast to a traditional view of the history of style, which is based on progression, irreversibility and defined categories, the idea is to place Willumsen's artistic production in a wider context, where the phenomena of popular culture, 16th century Mannerism and the concept of Bad Painting all play a part in the interpretation of the late works. This approach entails a challenge to the mainstream narrative of modernism, which especially has canonised the avant-garde movements and abstract expressionism, and seeks to establish the late works as an interesting and relevant part of 20th century art. Several exhibition projects in recent years have helped to open the way to an interest in and new interpretation of art that has otherwise been written off or marginalised. Mention must especially be made of two exhibitions: *Cher Peintre*, which among other places could be seen at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (2002). The exhibition showed a type of figurative painting from the period since the Second World War, the artistic value and relevance of which has been and remains the subject of debate.¹¹ In addition, the exhibition *Bad Painting/good art* in the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (MUMOK) in Vienna, which sought to provide a historical account of the Bad Painting phenomenon relating it to a certain strategy of painting, is an important point of reference for the reinterpretation of Willumsen's works from the 1930s and onwards.¹² Common to the exhibitions is their questioning of figurative painting as being *either* traditional, nostalgic kitsch seeking to conserve values *or* an ironical, iconoclastic and meta-reflective game. The *Cher Peintre* exhibition's explicit aim was to ask the question whether figurative painting can at one and the same time be provocative and genuine, critical and sentimental.¹³

[<top>](#)

Framing the late works

- [9] If, in terms of form and content, one tries to define the late works of Willumsen, one easily ends up categorising them as yet another period or style, which is not the purpose of the new reading. Neither is it limited to discovering Willumsen's sources of inspiration

¹¹ *Cher Peintre, Lieber Maler, Dear Painter*, Centre Pompidou, 12.6-2.9.2002 (also shown in Kunsthalle Wien and Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt). Among the artists represented were Bernard Buffet, John Currin, Peter Doig, Alex Katz, Martin Kippenberger, Elizabeth Peyton, Francis Picabia and Sigmar Polke.

¹² *Bad Painting/good art*, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (MUMOK), 6.6.-12.10.2008. Among the participating artists were Georg Baselitz, John Currin, Giorgio de Chirico, Philip Guston, Neil Jenney, Asger Jorn, Martin Kippenberger, René Magritte, Albert Oehlen, Francis Picabia, Sigmar Polke and Julian Schnabel.

¹³ Alison M. Gingeras, "'Lieber Maler, male mir...!'. Learning from Kippenberger: Figurative painting as provocative and sincere, critical and sentimental", in: *Dear Painter, paint me ... Painting the Figure since late Picabia*, ed. Alison M. Gingeras, Centre Pompidou 12.6-2.9.2002, Kunsthalle Wien 20.9.2002-1.1.2003, Schirn Kunsthalle 15.1-6.4.2003, exh. cat., Ghent 2002, 10.

or his "true" intentions. The aim is to put into context or "frame" a number of works that have been regarded as isolated, indefinable "curiosities". Thereby it becomes clear that the "odd" quality to some extent is to be found in Willumsen's art as far back as the 1890s and that it existed in the elder art that he was so interested in and collected as well as in the visual culture of his time. Irrespective of what Willumsen was either directly or indirectly influenced by, the late works form part of a larger cultural context by which they are in part determined, but which they also help to form. By relating Willumsen's late works to other cultural trends and expressions, they are opened to interpretation and their relevance to contemporary viewers is increased.

[10] In general, it can be said that the late "odd" works contain a number of features, some of which can also be found in Willumsen's earlier works, but which are condensed especially in the works from c. 1930 until his death in 1958. There is a high-use of effects – whether in terms of colour, form or content – which grated on Willumsen's contemporaries and after his death contributed to isolating them from Willumsen's other works. The works seem open for a literal interpretation, which differs from the symbolical content of earlier periods. Willumsen cultivates this literalness and for example remains silent on the question of possible interpretations of the content of the 1930s monumental trilogy *Titian Dying* in which Willumsen stages his own death and resurrection.

[11] An intensification of the use of specific effects and a change of expression and to some extent motif can thus be detected in the late works, but they do not constitute a breach, a sudden change of style or a clearly defined category. This is an important premise for the re-interpretation of these works. Some strategies can be traced right back to the 1890s and must be seen as an integral part of Willumsen's artistic method. There are thus similarities in the way in which under symbolist influence Willumsen simplifies the pictorial elements in the 1890s and in the late works. The juxtaposition of two interacting figures in motion in an undefined space is for instance the motif in both *Two Breton Women Parting after a Chat* from 1890 (fig. 2) and *My Father and My Mother Meet for the First Time in Front of Christiansborg Palace* from 1947 (fig. 3). In addition, the two paintings have numerous formal similarities: the simplification of the figures, the soft curves, plainly delimited areas of colour, clear contours and colour contrasts in a composition based in diverging lines. All these elements must be considered recurrent features in Willumsen's art, and not as characteristics limited to a specific period. The strong pictorial simplification is also found as far back as in the 1890s, for example in the etching *Fertility* from 1891 – a representation of the artist's pregnant wife, Juliette, which created a large scandal, when it was exhibited in The Free Exhibition, the year of its making.



2 J. F. Willumsen, *Two Breton Women Parting after a Chat*, 1890, oil and tempera on canvas, 100,4 x 93,2 cm. KUNSTEN Museum of Modern Art Aalborg, Aalborg, inv. nr. NK 811 (photograph © KUNSTEN Museum of Modern Art Aalborg) (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011)



3 J. F. Willumsen, *My Father and My Mother Meet for the First Time in Front of Christiansborg Palace*, 1947, oil on canvas, 107 x 147 cm. The J. F. Willumsen Museum, Frederikssund, inv. nr. 253 (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011)

[12] An important context for the reading of Willumsen in general, but perhaps of the "odd" aspects in his works in particular is his interest in elder art, particularly antique and renaissance art, including his own collection, "The Old Collection" with about 2000 works some of which have been identified as works by Jacopo Bassano, Parmigianino, Andrea del Sarto, Giorgio Vasari and other important artists. Of elder painters Willumsen says

that he best liked Jan van Eyck (c. 1395-1441) on account of his purity and the preciseness of his drawing.¹⁴

- [13] Bizarre and distorted figures dating back to Greek Antiquity were also studied closely by Willumsen. Francisco Goya's (1746-1828) famous series of etchings of war scenes, *Desastros de la Guerra*, must have been a reference point for Willumsen's own war graphics, which he made during the First World War.¹⁵ The motif in the etching *The Invasion* is a deformed metamorphosis of a horseman who in each of the many versions is increasingly caricatured, simplified and bestially conceived, and when Willumsen returns to printmaking in the 1940s there are also clear parallels with Goya's fondness for the grotesque. In addition, Willumsen bought several portraits with an element of caricature and (wrongly) believed he possessed a painting by Cézanne entitled *Portrait of the Man with the Long Nose*.¹⁶ The portrait was possibly a reference point for the grotesque physiognomies in some of the graphics from the 1940s.¹⁷



4 J. F. Willumsen, *The Evening Soup*, 1918, oil on canvas,
160 x 231 cm. The J. F. Willumsen Museum, Frederikssund, inv. nr.
334 (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011)

- [14] The most important link between the "odd" works and elder art is Willumsen's fascination with the 16th-century Italian Mannerists, whose works he started buying around 1911. Willumsen came across the most influential of the Mannerists, Doménikos Theotokópoulos or "El Greco"(1541-1614) during his first trip abroad in 1889, when he

¹⁴ Undated note, Small storage room, drawer 23, box 5, J. F. Willumsen Museum archives.

¹⁵ Sigurd Schultz, *J. F. Willumsen*, Copenhagen 1967, 15-16. Leila Krogh, *J. F. Willumsen. Over grænser*, Ordstrupgaard 2.3.-4.6.2006, Musée d'Orsay 27.6.-17.9.2006, exh. cat., Charlottenlund 2006, 170.

¹⁶ The J. F. Willumsen Museum, GS. 1045.

¹⁷ This has been pointed out by Leila Krogh and Peter Michael Hornung, *"Gamle Samling" Udvalgte malerier*, J. F. Willumsens Museum, 1.6.-30.10.1975, exh. cat., Frederikssund 1975, 10.

saw works by him in the Prado Museum in Madrid. In 1911, he bought one of El Greco's early works, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, and intensely studied him the following years. This resulted in a two-volume book about the youth of El Greco, published in 1927. Traditionally, Willumsen is considered to have been particularly inspired by El Greco in a number of works from the period 1912-1918 and in some of his many paintings from Venice from the beginning of the 1930s. The painting *The Evening Soup* from 1918 has been seen as the work by Willumsen that is most strongly influenced by El Greco (fig. 4). It is an everyday motif that is transformed into a "Last Supper" painting in a vibrant yellow and black universe. The family gathered around the evening meal is dramatised by a room portrayed in a perspective that draws us in, by intense colour combinations and deformities in the figures. *The Evening Soup* and the Venice paintings also contain the ecstatic and spiritual dimension that is found in works by El Greco. The exploding lamp in *The Evening Soup* is reminiscent of a divine light and the similarly exploding sky in *The San Trovaso Canal in Venice. Moonlight* has the same fascinating mystical character as El Greco's dramatic cloud formations, which form the background to many of his religious motifs.

- [15] In the "odd" works from the 1940s, the motifs are banal, everyday life stories, but they make use of the same Mannerist techniques as are employed for instance in *The Evening Soup*. There are rooms with strong impressions of depth, perspective distortions and dissonant colours, where the figures flow weightless and the white, agitated and sharply defined faces in the portraits resemble the figures in El Greco's "ghost portraits".¹⁸ The entire composition in *The Naked Figures on the Promenade* (fig. 5) with the naked bodies in various poses is reminiscent of the motif in El Greco's *Laocöon*,¹⁹ although the dramatic battle with the serpents has been replaced by gymnastic exercises and relaxation. The influence of Mannerism in Willumsen's works cannot be limited to the above mentioned period of 1912-1918 and to the Venice paintings but is also a dominant trait of the late "odd" works as the art historian Chris Fischer also has suggested when explaining the parallels between Willumsen's art and Mannerism in the exhibition catalogue accompanying *J. F. Willumsen – The Late Period*.²⁰ As Fischer points out, with his interest

¹⁸ The art historian and senior researcher in the Danish National Gallery of Art, Chris Fischer points out the relation to the "ghost portraits" and provides this general description of mannerist paintings: "[...] the composition is fluid; there is an emphasis on the sinuous play of lines, surprising foreshortenings and deep perspectives. The figures are elongated and wildly gesticulating, but their hasty movements appear to be carefully arranged; they twist and turn in attitudes that are reminiscent of ballet but rarely justified by the subject. The main action is often drowned in subsidiary elements, which in connection with the use of dissonant colours makes an immediate reading of the picture difficult and adds to it an air of exclusive mysticism". Chris Fischer, "J. F. Willumsen og manierismen", in: *J. F. Willumsen – den sene periode*, Kunstforeningen, 29.8.-18.10.1992, exh. cat., Copenhagen 1992, 21. In addition to this, Fischer emphasises the general interest in movement in Mannerism.

¹⁹ The image is available online at: http://www.nga.gov/fcgi-bin/timage_f?object=33253&image=5363&c=gg29 (last accessed: 4 May 2012).

²⁰ In *The Painter Receives the Musician at the Entrance to Parnassus* from 1923, Fischer sees "the loose-jointed figures floating in an airless space" as morphologically and compositionally related to

in Mannerism, Willumsen forms part of the small group of artists rediscovering El Greco and establishing him as a pioneering figure for the expressionist movements of the 20th century. The Danish painter Jens Adolf Jerichau (1890-1916) was one of the young artists who like Willumsen went to Toledo on the trail of El Greco. From around 1910, El Greco's works were widely exhibited in museums all over Europe, and books and articles on the artist were published. So there is nothing regressive in Willumsen's "El Greco internalisation". On the contrary, it goes hand in hand with the modernist reaction to crisis, disillusionment and shattered pictures of the world that may be seen as manifested in the transformation of external space into images of internal mental states associated with the expressionist movements.



5 J. F. Willumsen, *The Naked Figures on the Promenade*, 1933, oil on canvas, 160 x 230 cm. The J. F. Willumsen Museum, Frederikssund, inv. nr. 67 (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011)

- [16] Other cultural phenomena from the first part of the 20th century can also be linked to the "odd" elements in the late works. The energetic use of effects in which garish colours and drastic movements turn the paintings into minor everyday dramas are reminiscent of the expression in the commercial images which increasingly are seen in the public arena at the end of the 19th and throughout the 20th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, Willumsen was very interested in images such as are used in advertisements, illustrations in periodicals, newspapers and strip cartoons, as is demonstrated by his eleven large folders of cuttings. Here, he collected pictures and divided them into categories such as "Human Races", "Women", "Land and Sea". Willumsen called these folders of cuttings his

the figures in Domenico Tintoretto (1560-1635) and Palma Giovane (1548/50-1628), some of whose works Willumsen possessed. Fischer, "J. F. Willumsen og manierismen", 24. (Willumsen also possessed works by several other Mannerists including Jacopo Bassano, Francesco Parmigianino, Francesco Salviati, Cavaliere d'Arpino, the older Carel van Mander and Corneliis Bloemaert.)

"visual memories" and added new material to them until at least 1911.²¹ Close links between these cuttings of images encountered in popular culture and Willumsen's own works indicate that he considered a postcard from Tunis to be just as important a tool in the artistic work process as a drawing of a classical monument. Parallels found between the cuttings and Willumsen's works from the 1930s furthermore suggest that the folders could have continued to be an important working tool at least until this time.²² This prompts the question whether Willumsen oriented himself towards the renewal in the depiction of the human figure found in popular culture in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, when otherwise much of the mould-breaking experiments in the field of visual art were done within the non-figurative domain. Some of Willumsen's self-portraits from the 1940s and 1950s (fig. 6) are reminiscent of the superheroes of the time as presented in strip cartoons, cartoon films and feature films, and the women in the female portraits are modern like the women models from periodicals and newspapers.²³



6 J. F. Willumsen, *Self-Portrait*, 1951, oil on canvas, 54 x 38 cm. Victor Petersens Willumsen-samling, Hjørring (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011)

[17] In relation to Willumsen's manner of painting and use of colour it is relevant to note that as he grew older he increasingly had to battle with near-sightedness and poor vision in

²¹ Leila Krogh, *Fiktion & virkelighed. J. F. Willumsens fotografier*, J. F. Willumsens Museum, 23.6.-30.12.1995, exh. cat., Frederikssund 1995, 118.

²² Anne Gregersen, "J. F. Willumsens udklipsmapper", in: *Kunstmagasinet Janus*, no. 1 (March 2009), 8-13.

²³ For further consideration of these parallels, see Anne Gregersen, "J. F. Willumsens identitetsleg i 1940'erne" and Gry Hedin, "Kongesønnens bryllup – en invitation", both articles in: Anne Gregersen, *Et værk uden grænser*.

the dark. He himself believed that his problems were due to congenital nyctalopia, though it is unlikely that he suffered from this. In several contexts he complains about his eye problems, which he believes influences his way of painting, for instance in a letter to Alice Bloch:

And besides, my eyes are completely haywire, and in dark weather they actually provide me with a headache. But now I know what is wrong with them [...] It's a congenital weakness popularly known as "night blindness". That is to say that the rods or elements in the retina that react to light and dark are few in number or too weak, while those that receive and absorb shades of colour are strongly developed. This suits my manner of painting well. I have always been bothered by this curiosity, but only now as I am growing older and my lenses no longer function fully; it is simply agonizing. I have acquired a pair of expensive new glasses that help a little, but wearing glasses is nevertheless about the same as being blind, for you don't see anything when it is not in focus.²⁴

[18] In a letter to his friend Johan Rohde in 1917, Willumsen says the same, adding that he can consequently not see anything clearly in gloomy weather. This explains his aversion to the dull weather in Denmark and his predilection for the sunshine of the South, but it cannot be used as an exhaustive explanation of his choice of colour. The fact that he does not seek a naturalist choice of colour is expressed among other places in some lines written in 1921 in which he directly suggests that you have to adapt nature to the paint colours available, as those paints cannot reproduce all the shades of nature.²⁵

[19] Willumsen is also perfectly well aware of the effect of his use of colour which he reads about in many reviews in the 1930s and 1940s sent from Denmark to his home in Nice and later in Cannes. For instance, one reviewer writes,

There is something abnormal about Willumsen's colours. This is a cocaine addict forever increasing his dosage to such an extent that it would ultimately finish off an ordinary person.²⁶

²⁴ Letter from J. F. Willumsen to Alice Bloch. Undated, c. 1918, Leila Krogh, ed. *Løvens breve. J. F. Willumsens breve til Alice Bloch 1899-1923*, Frederikssund 1987, 77. I am grateful to the eye specialist Per Nellesmann Bang and to Morten La Cour, Professor of Eye Surgery in Copenhagen University, who have given me their assistance in interpreting Willumsen's eye problems on the basis of the above quotation and various works. Both Nellesmann Bang and La Cour believe that Willumsen suffered from presbyopia (age-related poor sight) and therefore needed glasses. Nellesmann furthermore points out that it is quite normal in older people for their sight to deteriorate in the dark and in subdued lighting, and this explains the inefficacy of glasses when the light is not sufficiently strong. Nellesmann considers it unlikely that Willumsen suffered from congenital nyctalopia, which is relatively rare and would have given him other problems with his sight as he grew older. At all events, neither poor night vision nor presbyopia should have any influence on the sense of colour, although Willumsen's words suggest that he felt there was a connection.

²⁵ Note dated 2.5.1921, Small storage room, drawer 23, box 1, J. F. Willumsen Museum archives.

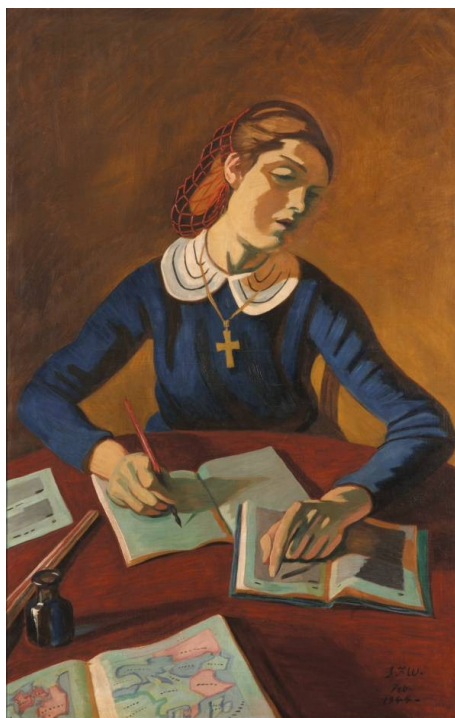
²⁶ Ernst Mentze, *J. F. Willumsen. Mine erindringer fortalt til Ernst Menze*, Copenhagen 1953, 268.



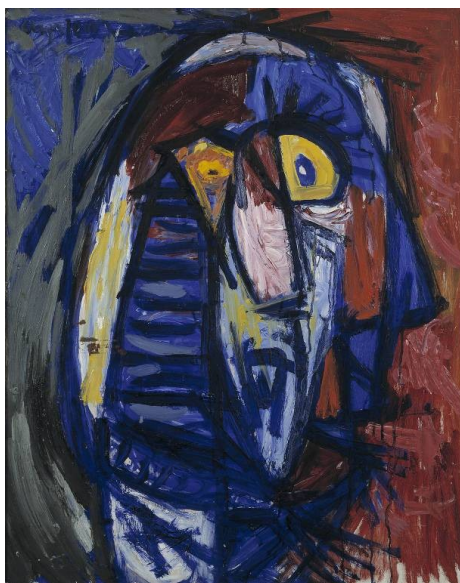
7 Eigil Jacobsen, *Green Masks*, 1941-42, oil on canvas, 94,5 x 72 cm. National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen, gift 1958, inv. nr. KMS4974 (Reproduced from: Per Hovdenakk, *Egill Jacobsen 1. Malerier 1928-65*, Holstebro 1980, 40)



8 J. F. Willumsen, *Huntress in the forest*, 1934, oil on canvas, 190 x 141 cm (including original frame). The J. F. Willumsen Museum (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011)



9 J. F. Willumsen, *The Female Student*, 1944, oil on canvas, 141 x 91 cm. Victor Petersens Willumsen-samling, Hjørring (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011)



10 Asger Jorn, *Mask*, 1945, oil on plywood, 81 x 64 cm. KUNSTEN Museum of Modern Art Aalborg, Aalborg, inv. nr. NK 508 (© Donation Jorn, Silkeborg/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011. Photograph © Thomas Pedersen and Poul Pedersen)

[20] In addition to the fact that Willumsen's choice of colours are close to the ones found in contemporary popular culture, they are also not far from the abstract trends in Denmark of the time, although Willumsen is also in many cases far more radical in his use of strong colours. If we look at the colours in works by the Danish concrete painters such as those from the 1940s by Ib Geertsen, Richard Mortensen and Richard Winter, there are parallels to Willumsen's late works, and there are also echoes of Willumsen's dissonant

combinations of colours and complimentary colour contrasts in paintings made by the group of artists known as the Høst Exhibition:²⁷ Egill Jacobsen's *Green Masks* (fig. 7) is composed by the same contrasts of shades of yellow and green as Willumsen's *Huntress in the forest* (fig. 8), and Willumsen's *The Student* (fig. 9) and Asger Jorn's *Mask* (fig. 10) both make use of the basic contrast of the primary colours red, blue and yellow. Sigurd Schultz is aware of these parallels when in a review of Willumsen's paintings in *The Free Exhibition*²⁸ in 1947 he argues that the "passionate expressionist quality" of Willumsen's earlier works has vanished and been replaced by a "colouristically objective use of colour" that is entirely in line with the use of colour encountered in the youngest abstract painters.²⁹ Actually the parallels between the abstract mask paintings and Willumsen's works go even further: there is a mask-like character to Willumsen's portraits, in which the features of those portrayed are coarsened and brought out in a theatrical fashion.³⁰

- [21] Parallels between the use of colour in the paintings from the 1930s and 1940s and contemporary abstract art are interesting, as they show his late works are related to a contemporary artistic approach, suggesting that it is the figurative, distorted and exaggerated elements in Willumsen's works that made him difficult to place. On other points he is in keeping with the abstract works that to a vast degree have defined Danish modernism.

[<top>](#)

A closer look at form and content in the late works

- [22] Starting out from the understanding of the "odd" as something that is encountered at various times in Willumsen's oeuvre and which is related to mannerist art, to popular culture and to other artistic movements, it is possible better to pin down the features relating to both form and content that characterise the late works without defining them as a fixed stylistic category.
- [23] In *Woman plays with a cat*, the cat is being caught by a woman with abnormally big arms and hands and with shoulders and neck like a professional (male) boxer as it leaps on to her lap (fig. 11). The princess in *The Wedding of the King's Son* almost floats like a fairy in her lilac slippers, but again with big arms that are completely out of proportion and a masculine body behind the fluttering garments (fig. 1). As in the case of the little girl's

²⁷ The Høst Exhibition was a predecessor of COBRA and was made up of abstract as well as naturalist artists, but in time it became centred on the abstract. The group existed from 1939 to 1949.

²⁸ The Free Exhibition was established in 1891 by J. F. Willumsen and others in opposition to the official exhibition place of the Royal Academy of Arts, Charlottenborg.

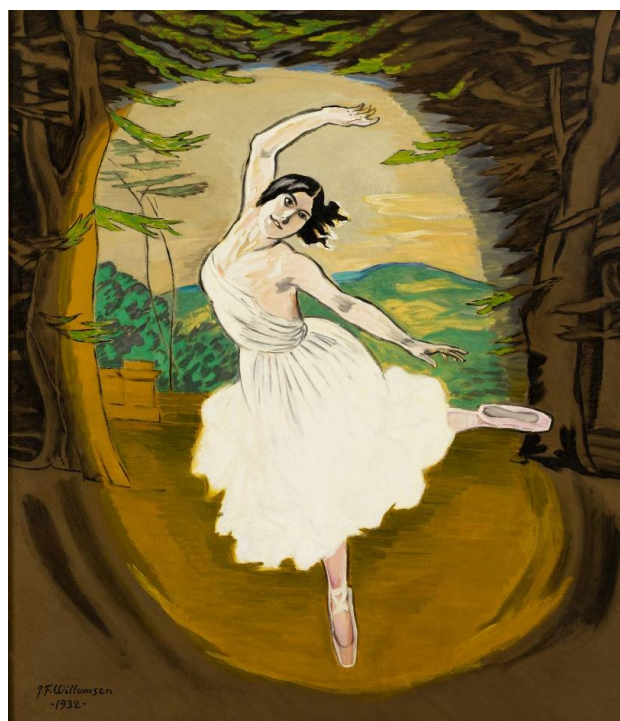
²⁹ Sigurd Schultz, "Den 83-årige Maler har fornyet sig", in: *Aarhus Stiftstidende*, 28.2.1947.

³⁰ The art editor of the newspaper *Politiken*, Peter Michael Hornung has pointed to this in a private conversation.

arm in *The Evening Soup*, the anatomy of the figures in Willumsen's late works are often fashioned in an extreme form and out of all proportion.



11 J. F. Willumsen, *Woman plays with a cat*, 1945, oil on canvas, 60 x 55 cm. J. F. Willumsen Museum, Frederikssund, inv. nr. 246 (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011)



12 J. F. Willumsen, *Mme Michelle Bourret as Etoile*, 1932, oil on canvas, 153 x 135,5 cm. The J. F. Willumsen Museum, Frederikssund, inv. nr. 66 (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011)

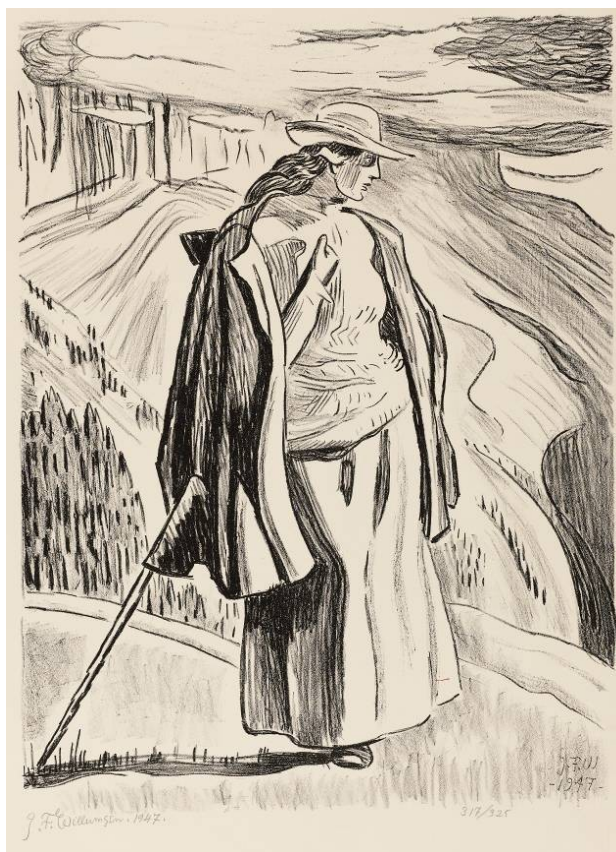
[24] The body has often lost its equilibrium and is overbalancing – towards the spectator in the dance picture *Étoile* (fig. 12) or into the focal plane as in the self-portrait *Titian Dying*

(fig. 13). Elsewhere it is bodybuilder-like and flattened as the king's son in *The Wedding of the King's Son*. In the graphic works from the 1940s, the proportions are often completely distorted with insistent bodies pushing themselves forward towards the viewer. A clear contrast between the proportions used in Willumsen's earlier works and the late ones is seen by comparing the painting *A Mountaineer* from 1912³¹ with the graphic version of the same work from 1947 (fig. 14). In both works, body and landscape are reflected in each other, but whereas the woman is naturalistically presented in the painting, her body is oversized and overflows into the landscape in the lithograph. Her face is diminutive, whereas the body is a mountain in itself. Many of the woodcuts from the 1940s are close-ups in which parts of the body come quite close to the viewer to show distorted proportions accompanied by strangely deformed faces with projecting chins and simplified grimaces.



13 J. F. Willumsen, *Titian Dying*. First picture in the trilogy of *Titian Dying*, 1935, oil on canvas, 300 x 250 cm. The J. F. Willumsen Museum, Frederikssund, inv. nr. 105 (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011)

³¹ The image is available online at: <http://www.smk.dk/udforsk-kunsten/samlingerne/vaerk-i-kunstdatabase/view/index/Start/kunstvaerk/en-bjergbestigerske> (last accessed: 4 May 2012).



14 J. F. Willumsen, *The Mountaineer*, 1947, lithography, ca. 59,5 x 44,8 cm. The J. F. Willumsen Museum, Frederikssund, inv. nr. S.S. 178 (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011)

- [25] Characteristic of the colouring in the late works are the conspicuous contrasts, which are intensified by means of striking outlines and brightly illuminated surfaces set against dark backgrounds. Willumsen's use of colour distances the pictures from reality and gives them an artificial expression that contemporaries criticised as being garish and disharmonious, too much in the style of posters. Whereas the colours throughout Willumsen's oeuvre are of considerable intensity the late works make use of crass splashes of colour. Sharp pink alongside grass green in the modified part of *The Wedding of the King's Son*, brash orange or yellow fields in contrast to cobalt blue in *Sketch of Michelle Bourret* (fig. 15) and a yellow body against a green background in *Huntress in the forest* (fig. 8) make the paintings vibrate. The striking colour combinations create an effective display of natural and complementary contrasting colours, and black indicates clear distinctions between figures and background. Against the bright surfaces, the faces of the figures are over-drawn and over-illuminated, white or pink with sharp, dark shadows and wrinkles. Several of the portraits are done in a kind of strip cartoon grisaille style, and here, too, the effect is achieved through contrasts. This is the case in the almost abstract self-portrait from 1955, which Willumsen created in response to a

commission from the Museum of National History in Frederiksborg Castle³² (fig. 16) and also in the self-portrait from 1951 (fig. 6).



15 J. F. Willumsen, *Sketch of Michelle Bourret*, 1946, tempera and pencil on paper, 28 x 37,9 cm. Victor Petersens Willumsen-samling, Hjørring (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011)



16 J. F. Willumsen, *Self-Portrait*, 1955, oil on canvas, 61 x 50,3 cm. Museum of National History, Frederiksborg Castle, Hillerød (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011)

³² This painting is quite atypical of Willumsen, done in an abstract style which brings to mind works by William de Kooning, and it deserves further analysis. It might be thought that the rough manner of painting was a result of Willumsen's great age and poor eyesight, but other paintings from the same year are executed with far greater precision. As this was a work commissioned by and handed over to the Museum of National History, it must be assumed that the style was intentional and that Willumsen was content with the result.

[26] With regard to content, the late works are also distinct. The motifs in Willumsen's early works often have some grandiose starting point: the monumental mountains as a reflection of human heroism; the burning sun as a metaphor for the intensity of life, and stories with an ethical overtone expressing Willumsen's view of the fundamental conditions of human existence. They are informed by a classical tradition, and everything – subjects, materials and dimensions – is conceived on a grand scale. The motifs can also be more banal, but then, as in *The Evening Soup*, they are often presented in a dramatic universe worthy of El Greco. From the beginning of the 1930s, the grandiose increasingly gives way to urban views, dances, portraits and a kind of genre painting with presentations of situations from everyday life where the personal and the biographical is staged with a striving for effect reminiscent of the advertisement. For instance, Willumsen paints a portrait of his mistress and muse Michelle Bourret as an angelic magical master baker with a deformed face serving birthday cakes on the artist's 80th birthday (fig. 17), and his parents are the central figures in a colourful fairy-tale portrayal of their first meeting (fig. 3).



17 J. F. Willumsen, *The Birthday Cake. A Joke*, oil on canvas, 142 x 91 cm. The J. F. Willumsen Museum, Frederikssund. Inv. nr. 232 (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011)

[27] In addition to these works, Willumsen from the 1930s and onwards produces a large number of self-portraits that combine a comical element with profound earnestness and

self-revelation. The trilogy *Titian Dying*³³ is a self-projecting epic that both in format and in content virtually transcends the limits of how much attention a painting and an artist can demand of the viewer. It is self-important, serious and enigmatic and conceived on a grand scale like *A Mountaineer*³⁴ or *The Great Relief*³⁵. The subject is life, death and the artist's condition, but at the same time it is also an entertaining, comical cartoon movie culminating in the merge of Willumsen's body with that of a tiger. Other self-portraits contain a similar duality. There is something of the anti-hero about Willumsen as he stands before an empty canvas with heavy, dark rims round his eyes and a disillusioned expression in *Self-Portrait in Artist's Smock* (fig. 18), painted on his 70th birthday in 1933. The painting is repeated in 1948 – the same stance, but with still deeper furrows matching the ones in the smock and a harder expression in his eyes as well as a hand depicting his veins as powerful and fluorescent (fig. 19). *Self-Portrait with Laurel Wreath* (fig. 20) is also a birthday portrait in which, with a seriousness that cannot be taken seriously, Willumsen has painted himself as an emperor with a laurel wreath on his head in a portrait of very modest dimensions.



18 J. F. Willumsen, *Self-Portrait in Artist's Smock*, 1933, oil on canvas, 119 x 117 cm. The J. F. Willumsen Museum, Frederikssund. Inv. nr. 69 (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011)

³³ Images of the three paintings of the trilogy are available online at: <http://www.jfwillumsensmuseum.dk/index.php?id=203&L=1> (last accessed: 4 May 2012).

³⁴ 1904. Belongs to Hagemanns Kollegium (a 2nd version from 1912 is the property of the Danish National Gallery of Art).

³⁵ 1893-1928. The property of the Danish National Gallery of Art. On permanent loan to J. F. Willumsens Museum. The image is available online at: <http://www.jfwillumsensmuseum.dk/index.php?id=200> (last accessed: 4 May 2012).



19 J. F. Willumsen, *Self-Portrait in Artist's Smock*, 1948, oil on canvas, 140 x 118 cm. Private collection (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011)



20 J. F. Willumsen, *Self-Portrait with Laurel Wreath*, 1943, oil on canvas, 35 x 27 cm. The J. F. Willumsen Museum, Frederikssund. Inv. nr. 236 (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011)

[28] The artist Per Kirkeby writes of this interplay between pathos and comedy in Willumsen's oeuvre, characterising it as fundamentally ironical. While the content is conceived on a grand scale, the manner of painting is flat, theatrical and devoid of tension. Kirkeby calls the first painting in the trilogy *Titian Dying* a

model example of these strange, merciless, painted surfaces in Willumsen. Everything is determined; nothing is left in painterly or lyrical indeterminacy. Or materially seductive. Painted from nine to four, as though it were a cinema advertisement or a piece in the official painterly tradition of a royal school of stage painting.³⁶

[29] In Kirkeby's view, this irony expresses a banality that is linked to the most profound insights. When, in his helplessness in the face of death and the loss of his second wife Willumsen imagines himself floating in the sky like a sphinx with a tiger's body in the final image of the trilogy, this is a, according to Kirkeby, a humorous solution to the fundamental existential questions he is putting to himself.

[30] Closely linked to banality, there is a literalness in Willumsen's late works that – at least in terms of motif – discourages interpretation, and the artist also seems himself to have thought of them as immediately possible to read. This apparent immediacy is also present at an earlier juncture and is for instance seen in Willumsen's choice of titles: of *The Great Relief*, he says in an interview in 1923 that it is not to have a title (apart from *The Great Relief*), that everyone must read into it whatever their own imagination prompts them, and that it "represents nothing, it 'is' nothing. It must speak for itself." Concerning the symbolical names of some of the figures (*War* and *Weakness*) he says that they acquired those titles of their own accord and that this is of no importance: "Call it all what you like."³⁷ This attitude is directly opposed to the possessive, philosophical approach encountered in other statements by Willumsen about his art and it may be seen in light of the aversion Willumsen met in the press when he explained the ambitious content of his works – an aversion often expressed in ironic commentaries and caricatures in the newspapers.

[31] In connection with the exhibition of the trilogy *Titian Dying* in The Free Exhibition in 1939, Willumsen was asked about the meaning of his works, and here we encounter the same attitude in the artist that he expresses in relation to *The Great Relief* in 1923:

I do not wish to say anything. Everything I have wanted with these works can be read from the paintings.³⁸

[32] This reluctance to provide an explanation of the works can, as mentioned, be seen as a retreat on the part of Willumsen – reinforced after the harsh treatment accorded to *The*

³⁶ Per Kirkeby, *Willumsen*, Hellerup 1998, 6.

³⁷ Inter., "Interview med Willumsen", in: *Berlingske Aftenavis*, 28.9.1922.

³⁸ Mentze, J. F. *Willumsen*, 269. See also Ulla Hjorth, "Himmelgården del 1", in: *Himmelgården*, 10.-25.9.1988, Den Frie Udstillingsbygning, exh. cat., Copenhagen 1988. Extract from the article "Titian døende" published in *Cras* no. 44 (1985).

Great Relief and the ridicule heaped on its symbolical contents. However, it is also possible that the works are meant to be taken literally, and that there is no answer to the question. It is Titian/Willumsen who dies, turns into a stone statue and finally floats in the sky as half a tiger, half a human being. Perhaps there is no more symbolism in it than in the paintings from the 1940s where the long descriptive titles illustrate the banality of the contents: *Young Lady Playing with Her Cat, as It attacks Her Hand* or *The Birthday Cake is Served. A Joke*.

[<top>](#)

The reception of the "odd" works

- [33] As mentioned earlier, the works described as "odd" are so called on account of their formal qualities and contents as well as on account of the way in which they have been received. Their style conflicted with contemporary dogmas, and their reception as expressed in art criticism and art literature of Willumsen's time suggests that it was very largely the indefinable quality of these works and the way in which they defied categorisation that made them difficult to place: Willumsen is a Dane, but his art is un-Danish and is described as sublime and banal, moving and ugly, spontaneous and meditative at one and the same time. His partially staged outsider position and his efforts to establish a museum for himself and his "Old Collection" put him at odds with his time, while his connection to modernist currents in the 1890s establishes him as a progressive figure in the eyes of younger Danish artists like Jais Nielsen, Mogens Lorentzen, Axel Salto, Olaf Rude, Oluf Høst and Svend Johansen. Works that caused a commotion 50 years earlier are in the 1940s considered to have paved the way for the arrival of modernism in Denmark. Some even go so far as to see him as the first modern Danish artist. For instance, the art historian and declared socialist Harald Rue introduces his book on contemporary Danish art by writing of Willumsen that he was the first to express the human situation in the modern "age of battle",³⁹ and Preben Wilmann, the editor and art critic of the newspaper *Social-Demokraten*, describes Willumsen as a pioneer who has formulated the artistic goal that all modern art rests on.⁴⁰
- [34] However, the late works create clear divisions of opinion. In his book on Danish painting from 1947, the author Poul Uttenreiter provides a version of Willumsen that sums up many of the attitudes encountered in newspaper articles and debates about him. Uttenreiter is for example quoted by the author, critic and controversialist Otto Gelsted in an article written in opposition to the idea of a Willumsen museum:⁴¹

³⁹ Harald Rue, *Dansk kunst omkring to verdenskrige*, introduction by J. F. Willumsen, Copenhagen 1948, 18.

⁴⁰ Preben Wilmann, "J. F. Willumsen 80 Aar", in: *Social-Demokraten*, 7.9.1943.

⁴¹ Otto Gelsted, "Spørgsmålstegnet Willumsen", in: *Land og Folk*, 22.7.1947.

In Willumsen's art we often find the sublime in close juxtaposition to the banal, the immediate alongside the result of thorough reflection, and these sharp transitions have led to very different estimations of it. In the eyes of some, he is the genius, the titan, an artist descended from Prometheus and one who has been apprenticed in Vulcan's forge, to others a self-willed and arrogant 'eccentric'. – He has in any case become a lonely figure and an outsider in Danish art.⁴²

[35] The arguments made by critics of the late works are often broadly based on the "un-Danish" qualities, their banal, poster-like appearance or simply their "ugliness". Very significantly, there is more or less agreement among both Willumsen's supporters and opponents that the works are garish, bizarre, affected and "over the top", but this same analysis of it can lead to both a positive and a negative evaluation and the discussions are very much concerned with whether their particularity makes them interesting or bad. Typical of this duality is the review by the artist Erik Clemmesen of The Free Exhibition that appeared in the newspaper *Kristeligt Dagblad* in 1950. Here, Clemmesen writes that the 87-year-old Willumsen's works are decisive for the quality of the entire exhibition:

You can like them or not, they are there, and in all their strangeness they enchant and captivate like some magic potion. They are attractive and repulsive, poetical and realistic [...].⁴³

[<top>](#)

The museum debate

[36] At the same time as the contorted and exaggerated manner is intensified in Willumsen's works from the beginning of the 1930s, the debate commences as whether to build a museum for him and his "Old Collection", and the reception of the "odd" works is closely interwoven with the polemic concerning the museum. It is especially in newspaper comments that Willumsen is judged as an artist and his late works evaluated while the art historical literature often just ignores or dismisses the late works in a few lines. Leading authorities in the art world such as Sigurd Schultz and the influential Leo Swane, who had been appointed director of the National Gallery of Denmark in 1931, spoke out strongly during the 1930s, 40s and early 50s respectively for and against the idea of the museum and thus also for and against the "odd" works, which were mainly those that would be incorporated into the museum's collection. The principal youth works by Willumsen had largely been sold, and it was the late works that were to be the central feature in the museum. One of the main objections raised by those opposing the museum was thus that many of Willumsen's most famous works were in private collections or abroad, so the collection that would constitute the museum would provide a skewed and incomplete impression of the artist.

⁴² Poul Uttenreiter, "Fra Philipsen til Willumsen", in: Erik Zahle, ed., *Danmarks Malerkunst. Fra Middelalder til Nutid*, 3rd ed., Copenhagen 1947, 256.

⁴³ Erik Clemmesen, "Den Frie Udstilling aabner", in: *Kristeligt Dagblad*, 25.2.1950.

- [37] In Danish art circles there was thus broad agreement as to Willumsen's significance as an artist and as a pioneer and champion for the modernist currents in the 1890s and there was equally overall agreement as to the importance of individual later works for Danish art history, for instance *Sun and Youth* from 1910, *A Mountaineer* from 1912 and *Fear of Nature. After the Storm No. 2* from 1916. So the discussion revolved around the question whether it is reasonable to establish a museum dedicated to a single artist, Willumsen, based on the value of his own art collection, the quality of his later works, and on whether his oeuvre as a whole deserves this honour. There was opposition to the idea of cultivating a single genius, as the establishment of a museum dedicated to him was regarded to be, and the Gustav Vigeland Park in Oslo and the Rudolf Tegner Museum in northern Zealand were mentioned as dreadful examples of how badly things can go wrong. The author Hans Kirk, who at that time was the culture editor of the communist newspaper *Land og Folk*, was among those who considered it to be "hysterical hero worship" to establish a museum dedicated to Willumsen.⁴⁴ The group of artists known as Høst-udstillingen (the Høst-exhibition group) directly opposed the establishment of a museum dedicated to a single artist in view of the idealisation of art and the cult of the individual genius it implies,⁴⁵ and the artist, writer and later *provocateur* Jørgen Nash called the "scandal" around the Willumsen museum "a veritable stab in the back to all living and progressive art in Denmark", comparing the idea of the museum to the Nazis' cult of the strong individual rising above all others.⁴⁶
- [38] This discussion centred on the cult of the genius bears the hallmark of an incipient reaction to the modernistic idea of the artist as a specially chosen individual who should be glorified. As the art historian Hans Dam Christensen has pointed out, the museum dedicated to a single artist is to a large degree a modernistic construct created for the artists of modernism. It presupposes an essential link between the artist's life and his work and the view of the artist as an outstandingly gifted genius who creates his own importance.⁴⁷ At the heart of the idea of the single artist museum is the fiction of the individual as a delimited concept, and the museum debate questioned the validity of this premise. The schism clearly stands out when the painter and art critic Pola Gauguin writes that the collection of Willumsen's art ought not to be divided into bits, but that it

⁴⁴ Hans Kirk, in reply to the article "Vi maa ikke sige Nej til Willumsens Gave!", in: *Land og Folk*, 3.8.1947.

⁴⁵ Discussion article in *Land og Folk* signed by Ejler Bille, Else Alfelt, Carl-Henning Pedersen, Asger Jorn, Erik Thommesen, Tage Møllerup, Henry Heerup, Erik Ortvad, Aage Vogel-Jørgensen, 13.1.1949.

⁴⁶ Jørgen Nash, "Omkring et Kunstkapel", feature in: *Information*, 24.1.1949.

⁴⁷ Hans Dam Christensen, "Kunstnersubjektet, enkeltkunstnermuseet og moderniteten", in: Hans Dam Christensen, *Forskydningens kunst. Kritiske bidrag til kunsthistoriens historie*, Copenhagen 2001, 206. Dam Christensen takes his idea of a museum as a discursive framework or practice from Mieke Bal: Mieke Bal, "The Discourse of the Museum", in: Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, eds., *Thinking about Exhibitions* (1996), Oxford 2005, 214.

should be seen as a totality, "a living organism".⁴⁸ This was directly opposed to the proposal coming from a number of artists, including those of the Høst-exhibition group, that the best of Willumsen's works are included in a museum of modern art. Here, his works would be integrated in the general artistic development of a period of time rather than being presented as works of a special individual without relation to his contemporaries.⁴⁹ However, nothing ever came of this museum of modern art, and neither was the J. F. Willumsen Museum to be the last of its kind in Denmark – The Jens Søndergaard Museum opened in 1958, Silkeborg Museum (now Museum Jorn) opened with the Asger Jorn collection in 1961, the Carl-Henning Pedersen and Else Alfelt Museum came in 1976, the Storm P. Museum in 1977, the Johannes Larsen Museum in 1986 and the Oluf Høst Museum in 1998. Paradoxically, Jorn, Pedersen, Alfelt and Jens Søndergaard⁵⁰ were all against the Willumsen Museum and the cult of the genius they thought went hand in hand with museums dedicated to a single artist.

[39] Another important factor in the discussions concerning the museum was the question of Willumsen's own art collection, "The Old Collection". As early as 1927, Willumsen set in motion plans for establishing a museum for his own works (the "New Collection") and the "Old Collection", and from his home in Nice he wrote to the then director of the National Gallery of Denmark, Gustav Falck, who two years later visited Willumsen and formed his opinion of the works in the "Old Collection". Falck was not enthusiastic, and Willumsen doggedly had to insist on the value of the collection until it was exhibited in Charlottenborg⁵¹ in 1947,⁵² where the final death sentence was pronounced on it. A number of prominent museum specialists and art historians agreed on advising the Danish authorities against accepting the collection, and Leo Swane delivered a devastating critique in which he argued that Willumsen's attribution of artists' names was made up, and that the average value of the collection was hopelessly low.⁵³

⁴⁸ The words of Pola Gauguin in a submission to Aalborg Municipality by the Sørensen brothers, who made an attempt to have the Willumsen museum built in Aalborg. J. F. Willumsen Museum archives.

⁴⁹ The Høst-exhibition group wrote a letter to the editor of *Land og Folk* in 1949 proclaiming their opposition to the museum. *Land og Folk*, 13.1.1949.

⁵⁰ Søndergaard was one of 119 artists and art historians to sign a protest against the Willumsen Museum in 1949. *Nationaltidende*, 17.3.1949. In 1952 Søndergaard however decided to testament his residence and a collection of works to the municipality of Vandborg-Ferring with the purpose of creating a museum there after his death.

⁵¹ Charlottenborg was the official exhibition place of the Royal Danish Academy of Art.

⁵² The collection was exhibited from 24.7-10.8.1947 on the initiative of *Politiken* after the museum committee working for a Willumsen museum had been unable to have a venue put at its disposal. In connection with the exhibition, a catalogue was published in which Willumsen accounted for the acquisition of the collection and his thoughts on it: J. F. Willumsen, "Noter til 'Gamle Samling'", in: *J. F. Willumsens samlinger af ældre kunst*, 34.7-10.8.1947, Charlottenborg, exh. cat., Copenhagen 1947.

⁵³ Leo Swane, *Politiken*, 27.7.1947. More on the museum debate can be found in e.g. Hjort, *J. F. Willumsen i Europa*, 140-159, Krogh and Hornung, "Gamle Samling" *Udvalgte malerier*, Mikael Bøgh Rasmussen, "J. F. Willumsens 'Gamle Samling'. Vurderingens omskiftelighed og samlerens strategier", in: *Samling, Antropologi* no. 43-44 (2001), 23-33 and Annette Johansen, "En kongesøn

- [40] While Willumsen considered his purchases of older works to be a large gift to the Danish state and the most important justification for establishing a museum, it ended by becoming one of the most powerful arguments against it.

[<top>](#)

Evaluation of the "odd" works

- [41] Especially in 1947, when Willumsen's works were exhibited both in the Spring Exhibition in The Free Exhibition and in a separate exhibition over the summer parallel with the exhibition of the "Old Collection" in Charlottenborg, the late works were evaluated and the criticism was harsh. The Spring Exhibition showed the older work, *Fear of Nature*. *After the Storm No. 2* and several new works including the paintings *The Birthday Cake*, *A Joke* (fig. 17), *The Female Student* (fig. 9), *My Father and My Mother Meet for the First Time in Front of Christiansborg Palace* (fig. 3), *Double Self-Portrait* (fig. 21) and a number of woodcuts. The juxtaposition of the early work with the new provided the opportunity for comparison between the early and late Willumsen, which often came out to the benefit of the earlier. One reviewer in the newspaper *København*, for instance, wrote of the "splendid" *Nature Fear* and its "light, bright, resplendent colours" in contrast to which the late works were described as "heavy, hard with pointed, sharp arabesques and an unpleasant oil-cloth effect".⁵⁴



21 J. F. Willumsen, *Double Self-Portrait*, 1946, oil on canvas, 72 x 92 cm. Private collection (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2011)

og hans brud genopstår", in: Anne Gregersen, ed., *Et værk uden grænser*.

⁵⁴ "Den frie udstilling", in: *København*, 28.2.1947.

- [42] The figures are called grimacing, forced and caricatured. As early as the 1890s, Paul Gauguin is asserted to have called Willumsen a "caricaturist",⁵⁵ and many of Willumsen's earlier works were also referred to as caricatures by the critics of the day, so this critique is nothing new. After having seen the paintings *The Painter and His Family* from 1912 and *Sophus Claussen Reading His Poem Imperia to Helge Rode and Willumsen* from 1915, the Norwegian art historian and museum director Jens Thiis writes that Willumsen always includes an element of caricature in any portrait he makes of himself.⁵⁶ The painter and writer Matthias Peschcke Køedt refers to the painting *Imperia* and several of Willumsen's other works as caricatures and calls the artist's portrait of the Danish art historian Vilhelm Wanscher a "splendid caricature" and "one of the most amusing paintings in Danish art".⁵⁷ Vilhelm Wanscher⁵⁸ himself also writes about the caricatured elements, which he considers intentional and closely linked to Willumsen's displacements and exaggerations of classical proportions. This is seen for example in *The Skewed Palace in Venice*, where Wanscher affirms that the inclination of the loggias is exaggerated in order to bring life to the gondola's sideways movement and likewise in a painting from Rome where an equestrian statue is leaning unnaturally to the right.⁵⁹ Wanscher also notes that Willumsen is not always confident in his architectural representations,⁶⁰ but Wanscher apparently sees the use of caricature as a quality and a strategy of invention on a formal level.
- [43] Leo Swane assesses Willumsen's works both in articles and features and generally considers everything from *The Great Relief* and hereafter as unsuccessful and of such poor quality that they are not even worth discussing. They are rough and unsophisticated in a painterly sense.⁶¹ Once more, it is the colouring, the flat "poster style" and the element of caricature that make them bad, and Swane furthermore is of the opinion that Willumsen is in no way a central figure in Danish art. He does not believe him to have had any particular influence even though he recognises qualities in his early work.⁶²

⁵⁵ Merete Bodelsen, *Willumsen i halvfemsernes Paris*, Copenhagen 1957, 53. Bodelsen here discusses the probability that the French painter, whom the art critic Karl Madsen quotes as having said of Willumsen, "He has a very personal talent, he is a caricaturist" was Paul Gauguin.

⁵⁶ Mentze, *J. F. Willumsen*, 212.

⁵⁷ Matthias Peschcke Køedt, *Statusopgørelse i Malerkunsten*, Copenhagen 1935, 44. Køedt is generally positive towards Willumsen and sees him as belonging to a Nordic tradition that must be understood on its own premises.

⁵⁸ Vilhelm Wanscher was a historian of art and architecture and one of Willumsen's most important supporters. He saw Willumsen as an exponent of the "grand style" and analysed his works in relation to the entire Western art tradition. Wanscher was also a professor in the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art in Copenhagen and played a very important role until the Second World War, when his sympathies for Nazi Germany led to his isolation.

⁵⁹ Vilhelm Wanscher, *J. F. Willumsen*, Danske Kunstnere XIV, Copenhagen 1937, 8.

⁶⁰ Wanscher, *J. F. Willumsen*, 9.

⁶¹ Leo Swane, "Sandhed eller Skønhed", reply to Møller Nielsen, in: *Social-Demokraten*, 1.2.1949.

⁶² Leo Swane, "Bedømmelsen af Willumsen", in: *Social-Demokraten*, 30.3.1949.

Hereby, Swane is one of the few people who actually judges Willumsen to be of no interest and he seems only to take part in the discussions to make sure a Willumsen museum will never see the light of the day.

[44] Also typical of the reception of the late works is the fact that the chairman of the committee working for the establishment of a Willumsen museum, the painter Erick Struckmann in 1949 decides on behalf of The Free Exhibition not to exhibit two works, *My Father and My Mother Meet for the First Time in Front of Christiansborg Palace* and *The Old Artist and His Muse* because the case for a museum has not yet been concluded. In addition, he is of the opinion that it can establish a dangerous precedent to exhibit the latter work, which was painted and signed by both Willumsen and Michelle Bourret, who was not a member of The Free Exhibition.⁶³ The view that exhibiting specific pictures would harm the museum plans is also found in a letter Struckmann wrote to Willumsen urgently advising him not to exhibit the modified version of *The Wedding of the King's Son* against this background.⁶⁴ The decision by The Free Exhibition not to exhibit certain works is met with disappointment but understanding on the part of Willumsen, who writes that the pictures can be exhibited the following year and that he knows that it is a genre that does not attract people.⁶⁵

[45] Sigurd Schultz is one of the few to defend the late works in the press, in contrast to the other commentators seeing them as harmonious and quite in keeping with contemporary ideas. In a newspaper article Schultz writes about the trivial contents in the late works, which for him reflects a man who quietly and calmly occupies himself with the everyday comforts in his surroundings and in his remembrances.⁶⁶ It is also in this article that Schultz writes on the similarity between Willumsen's new "sober colouring" and the colours in the youngest generation of abstract painters and sees this as a demonstration of Willumsen's constant willingness to accept impulses from outside. In relation to the graphic works, he is more ambivalent, writing of some of the late woodcuts:

They are strange, delving into a fantastic ugliness; they can appear to be sneering, but are they not rather fantasies extracted from the clouded musings of a fossilized mind?⁶⁷

[46] However, as the quotation in the beginning of this article demonstrates, Schultz does not believe his contemporaries, including himself, entirely capable of appreciating the late works.

⁶³ Letter from Erick Struckmann to J. F. Willumsen. 15.3.1949, J. F. Willumsen Museum letter archives.

⁶⁴ Johansen, "*En kongesøn og hans brud genopstår*", 83.

⁶⁵ Draft letter from J. F. Willumsen to Erick Struckmann, Cannes, 19.3.1949, J. F. Willumsen Museum letter archives.

⁶⁶ Schultz, "Den 83-aarige Maler har fornyet sig".

⁶⁷ Schultz, *J. F. Willumsen*, 21.

- [47] Another prominent supporter is the painter and graphic artist Aksel Jørgensen, who was a professor in the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and the director of the J. F. Willumsen Museum from its opening in 1957 until his death that same year. He views Willumsen as of great significance for the future of Danish art and believes he will have the same significance as the great Danish neo-classicist sculptor Thorvaldsen (1770-1844).⁶⁸
- [48] Apart from the determined critics or supporters, there were many artists and art critics whose attitudes to the late works were ambivalent and who considered them to be ugly, coarse and forced, but at the same time vital, powerful and challenging. The painter Mogens Lorentzen, for instance, fiercely defends the establishment of a museum in a feature in the newspaper *Politiken*. Here, he dismisses the opponents' arguments concerning the cult of the genius and their financial considerations, writing that the reason why such a large part of the art establishment is against the museum is mainly that these people have a background in French art, which cultivates aesthetics and beauty, and on the basis of this premise Willumsen's art is dreadful. According to Lorentzen, Willumsen does not seek beauty, but strength, which is rarely beautiful.⁶⁹
- [49] Hereby Lorentzen indirectly touches on the question of the "un-Danish quality" or the "Germanic character" in Willumsen's art, which is discussed again and again from the beginning of the 1900s and forth by artists and critics. Here Lorentzen esteems the un-Danish (and thereby un-French) as a positive feature in line with those of Willumsen's supporters who see him as larger than life – an artist of international standing for whom conditions at home in Denmark are too constricted and who therefore breaks out of the ordinary, the average, that is on offer in Denmark, and steps out on to the international stage. Conversely, the critics see it as coldness and homelessness, which contribute to isolate him as an artist.
- [50] Willumsen's most ardent supporter, Sigurd Schultz, also discusses the artist's un-Danish features. In a comparison between the Danish painter Joakim Skovgaard and Willumsen, Schultz refers to the former as a "popular" painter rooted in the Danish tradition, whereas Willumsen is the "exclusive artist with an individualistic attitude".⁷⁰ One of the leading supporters of Danish modernism, the art critic Carl V. Petersen, concludes his complimentary article on Willumsen on the occasion of his 60th birthday exhibition in The Free Exhibition, also published in *Tilskueren*, with the question of whether Willumsen is un-Danish. Petersen doesn't make up his mind on this point, but promotes him as a

⁶⁸ Kj., "Bevæget Willumsen-Debat i Studenterforeningen", in: *Nationaltidende*, 16.2.1949.

⁶⁹ Mogens Lorentzen, "Willumsen-museet" in: *Politiken*, 16.2.1949. This article is to be found in the Willumsen archives, and Willumsen has marked a passage in it referring to his "Old Collection" and written "Nonsense". Interestingly enough, on the other hand, he makes no comment on Lorentzen's reference to his works as "dreadful".

⁷⁰ Sigurd Schultz, "J. F. Willumsen. I Anledning af Kunstnerens 80-Aars-Dag", in: *Nationaltidende*, 7.9.1943.

heroic figure and asks whether Danish art can do without a "single great figure in the world of art and culture".⁷¹

- [51] In relation to the late works, it is precisely the "Germanic" element in them that is criticised in a review of The Free Exhibition in 1947. The reviewer, Lars Rostrup Bøyesen, compares a dynamism, which he sees as dictated from within, in a picture such as *Fear of Nature. After the Storm No. 2* with the dynamism in the late works. In the late works Bøyesen finds nothing but "external form", they are full of clichés and either serious or awkwardly humorous. According to Bøyesen Willumsen's Germanic qualities come out unrestrained in the late works and lacking the formal qualities found in the earlier works, which served as a "redeeming force".⁷² Bøyesen concludes his harsh criticism of the late works by metaphorically comparing the difference between Willumsen and the other artists in the exhibition to falling from a windswept mountain top down into a peaceful, Danish village surrounded by windbreaks.⁷³
- [52] What is called the "un-Danish" character in Willumsen's works appears to be a lack of charm, an "icy cold" as some reviewers call it, along with a strong-willed and forced element. But also its grandiloquent and ambitious qualities are criticised. Interestingly enough, Willumsen is generally accorded greater recognition in both Norway and Sweden, something the art historian Ulla Hjorth explains as resulting from a tradition in these countries for a more so-called "Germanic" style.
- [53] The increased hostility in Denmark towards anything "Germanic" in the late 1940s can of course be related to the Second World War and the need to mark a distance to the aesthetics and values of the Nazi regime. This concern has most likely influenced the overall reception of Willumsen's works. Earlier works, expressing the vitalist currents of the 20th century, are actually much more in thread with the Nazi ideology and aesthetics of health and strength than the late works and another reviewer asks if Willumsen's late works wouldn't have been called "entartete" by the German regime.⁷⁴

[<top>](#)

Willumsen's view of art and art criticism

- [54] Willumsen's view of his own art and the role of art in general is complex and difficult to ascertain – by means of aphorisms, notes, letters and interviews he presents himself as

⁷¹ Carl V. Petersen was the sole Danish art critic to give unswerving support to the new modernist movement that was becoming established in earnest during the First World War with the Artists' Autumn Exhibition in 1918 as a high spot that provoked serious scandal. In 1923, he was appointed director of Den Hirschsprungske Samling, and that year he wrote in *Tilskueren* a review of Willumsen's great retrospective exhibition in The Free Exhibition.

⁷² Lars Rostrup Bøyesen, "Fredeligt Foraar omkring et Urocentrum", in: *Berlingske Aftenavis*, 28.2.1947.

⁷³ Bøyesen, "Fredeligt Foraar omkring et Urocentrum".

⁷⁴ Mr. Corner, "En kunstner", in: *Kolding Avis*, ca. 1937.

the isolated genius creating international art and in opposition to all the movements of his time. He declares time and again that he does not see modern art, does not know it and is in no way influenced by it.⁷⁵ Picasso and Matisse have just reached their position by promoting themselves through good advertisement, he believes,⁷⁶ and he never mentions any contemporary artists as models or merely as being interesting and complains that they work far too much according to pattern and echo each other, thus undermining their individuality.⁷⁷ Nor does Willumsen consider elder art or works from his "Old Collection", with which he surrounded himself in his house in the south of France, as a source of inspiration or as models. Conversely, he describes the collection as a practical arrangement: As he gradually sold his own works, it was unpractical to have them hanging as decorations in his home and so he began to collect works by other artists and hang them up.⁷⁸

- [55] Willumsen's demands for originality are clearly expressed in a letter to Sigurd Schultz in which he writes about his own artistic development. He states that after his so-called symbolist period he wanted to work his way into a new art form in which he himself creates rather than copies nature, and affirms that he still makes use of this method. Willumsen submits a powerful attack on the mimesis idea:

You must not copy, not copy nature or any other image that forms in your eye. All bad art derives from the fact that it is copied.

- [56] Copying turns artistic creation into a mechanical undertaking without any spiritual dimension. The motif, too, must be created from scratch and Willumsen states that the first painting in which he did this was *Jotunheim*, which is a synthesis of the mountain sketches that Willumsen made during his visit to the Jotunheim Mountains in Norway in 1892.⁷⁹

[<top>](#)

Feeling versus reflection

- [57] From the beginning of the 20th century Willumsen establishes his opposition to contemporary modernist movements and defines his own art, mainly in statements in the press and in his own notes. In an interview with the Norwegian painter Christian Krohg from 1903, he refers to his art as having developed in an "ethical direction"⁸⁰ and he expresses himself in firm opposition to any idea of l'art pour l'art affirming that

⁷⁵ E.g. "Interview med Willumsen", in: *Berlingske Aftenavis*, 28.9.1923.

⁷⁶ Hjorth, J. F. *Willumsen i Europa*, 164, *Berlingske Tidende*, 7.7.1947.

⁷⁷ Emil Bønnelycke, "J. F. Willumsen og hans sidste Arbejder", in: *Politiken*, 7.9.1919.

⁷⁸ Willumsen, "Noter til 'Gamle Samling'", unpaginated.

⁷⁹ Draft letter from J. F. Willumsen to Sigurd Schultz, 20.5.1948, J. F. Willumsen Museum letter archives.

⁸⁰ Christian Krohg, "En ny Retning i Malerkunsten", in: *Verdens Gang*, 4.8.1903.

the bigger and more beautiful the idea in the service of which art stands, the greater the value gained by the work.⁸¹

[58] In a letter to Carl V. Petersen from 1923,⁸² Willumsen declares himself to be in agreement with Petersen's division of his art into two periods. The first period consisting of the earliest works until 1901, which are characterised by an internal struggle – Willumsen's struggle with himself and his search for form. After the turn of the century, his struggle is an external one which is related to the discovery and creation of a motif. Not only the visible motif, but what Petersen refers to as its "inner meaning, the human soul, the spirit in nature". It is a question of penetrating to the very essence in the motif, which Petersen calls finding the "image formula". And just as the constant experimenting with form diversifies the pictures during the first period, the choices of motif diversify them during the second period.⁸³ What Petersen actually suggests is a fundamental shift in Willumsen's art in 1901: Whereas the motif in the first period *is determined by the form*, in the second period it is the motif that *determines the form*. This priority seems to mark an opposition to the dominance given to form in much of the abstract art of the early 20th century and later on in abstract expressionism.

[59] In parallel with this ethical challenge and struggle for content, many statements by Willumsen point to an aversion to an intellectual approach to art and a much greater affinity with the emotional approach. Willumsen also gives the reasons for the change in his art around the turn of the century as personal turmoil (the death of his mother in 1899 and his wild infatuation with Edith Wessel, whom he met in 1897), which influences his mental state and thus his art.⁸⁴ So it also seems to be a fundamental misinterpretation on the part of several of his critics when they see Willumsen to be an "intellectual" artist consciously working reflectively, and Willumsen himself resists this interpretation. This is expressed for instance via his comments on an article in the periodical *Illustreret Tidende* from 1923. Sigurd Schultz writes of Willumsen's art that it generalises rather than individualises, that it conforms to rules, is intellectual and derives from conscious reflection, not from emotional inspiration.⁸⁵ To this, Willumsen writes question marks and words like "rubbish" and "nonsense" in the margins as well as comments like "It wasn't painted for the sake of the thought". So Willumsen clearly rejects Schultz's classification of his art as reflective, controlled and averse to experiment.

⁸¹ Krohg, "En ny Retning i Malerkunsten".

⁸² Letter from J. F. Willumsen to Carl V. Petersen, 11.12.1923, Small storage room, drawer 23, J. F. Willumsen Museum archives.

⁸³ Carl V. Petersen, "Udstillinger", in: *Tilskueren*, vol. 40 (December 1923), ed. Poul Levin, Copenhagen, 372, 375-376.

⁸⁴ Letter from J. F. Willumsen to Carl V. Petersen, 11.12.1923, J. F. Willumsen Museum letter archives.

⁸⁵ Sigurd Schultz, "J. F. Willumsen. Bemærkninger til Forstaaelse af hans Kunst og dens Udviklings Gang", in: *Illustreret Tidende*, vol. 65, no. 4 (28.10.1923), 61-62.

[60] By contrast, Willumsen comments on the emotional meaning in art in numerous aphorisms:

Art is materialised feelings, visions, thoughts. Art is not science.⁸⁶

A subject is felt and imagined before it is seen.⁸⁷

But there cannot be the shadow of doubt that art exists to be a delight to the eye and not something to awaken thought [...] only to allow art to awaken the wealth of your ideas. That is getting away from the pure objective of art.⁸⁸

The execution of a work precedes the discovery (of the motif).⁸⁹

[61] The same view is expressed in Harald Rue's book *Dansk Kunst omkring to Verdenskrige* (*Danish Art around two World Wars*) from 1948, which Willumsen introduces with a brief statement of what art is: Art is a craft tied to aesthetics and the most important task of a work of art is

to give us an intellectual or spiritual sense of something material. The craftsmanship can be as perfectly done as possible, but if it doesn't touch something within us, if it doesn't give us pleasure, then we are not keen on it.⁹⁰

[62] This affective attitude to art is clearly in opposition to the highly reflective and intellectual play with form and concepts in art found in the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century and with Duchamp as the lead figure in this respect. On the other hand it is not far from the theses of the surrealists and parts of abstract expressionism which argue that art should be based on instinct, drive and the subconscious. Or from Asger Jorn's statement that "the essence of art is its ability to touch people. If art is not touching, it is simply a failure."⁹¹ Willumsen starts out from an emotional point and though his experiments are governed by the need to express a topic he wants art to contain beauty and give joy. In a book written by the art historian Erik Moltesen on Willumsen, the artist himself says for instance that he has not wanted to use disproportions, and that if such are present, they have come without him being aware of it and as a result of his search for a specific effect.⁹²

[63] At the same time, Willumsen was aware of the criticism of his works and was conscious of how his expression differed from that of his contemporaries. This emerges as early as 1918, when in a letter to his art dealer Alice Bloch he writes that he will only have solo exhibitions, with The Free Exhibition as the only possible exception. Even there, however,

⁸⁶ Note dated 8.9.1936, Small storage room, drawer 23, box 1, J. F. Willumsen Museum archives.

⁸⁷ Undated note, Small storage room, drawer 23, box 1, J. F. Willumsen Museum archives.

⁸⁸ Undated note, Small storage room, drawer 23, box 1, J. F. Willumsen Museum archives.

⁸⁹ Undated note, Small storage room, drawer 23, box 1, J. F. Willumsen Museum archives.

⁹⁰ Rue, *Dansk kunst omkring to verdenskrige*, 11-13.

⁹¹ Asger Jorn, *Magi og skønne kunster*, Borgen, Copenhagen 1971, 18.

⁹² Erik Moltesen, *J. F. Willumsen. Introduktion til hans Kunst*, Copenhagen 1923, 8.

he would prefer to exhibit his works in groups as large and compact as possible. Owners of his works and art dealers must even be forbidden to arrange for his works to be hung together with those of others. The reason given by Willumsen for this restriction is that it has been demonstrated that when his works are hung in isolation among those of many others, the different or the remarkable qualities in them make them appear as crude in the eyes of visitors to the exhibition.⁹³ His awareness that his works are aberrant is also found in other contexts. In the above letter to Carl V. Petersen, Willumsen writes that he has always sought beauty in his art, but that as a kind of relaxation he occasionally takes the opposite line and seeks "character" or "the baroque".⁹⁴ The same point is expressed in an undated note. Willumsen argues here that it is necessary to work in opposites and to see grotesques and caricatures in contrast to beauty-filled images. The frolicsome, grotesque images are a respite between the great and beautiful paintings.⁹⁵

- [64] The recognition that there is something "different" about his works must be linked to Willumsen's general view that there is a delay in the understanding of his art. He says in various contexts that time is needed to understand his works, and that people can well at first feel repelled by them.⁹⁶ This understanding goes right back to the 1890s and his programmatic declaration inscribed on the etching *Fertility*:

Old art has its own ancient language, which the world has learnt to understand bit by bit. A new art has a newly created language that people must learn before they understand it.

- [65] But there is no reason to believe that Willumsen intentionally sought to stand apart from his contemporaries just for the point of it. In the beginning of the 20th century he actually proclaims his wish for a common approach and for common goals among the artists. It is in disappointment of his failure to establish this that he turns away from the art scene and acknowledges his art as being "different".⁹⁷

⁹³ Letter from J. F. Willumsen to Alice Bloch, dated 21.7.1918. Krogh, *Løvens breve*, 119. It is against this background that Willumsen refuses to exhibit in The Artists' Fall Exhibition. See also note 97 in this article on Willumsen's relationship with artists' associations and group exhibitions.

⁹⁴ Letter from J. F. Willumsen to Carl V. Petersen, 11.12.1923, J. F. Willumsen Museum letter archives.

⁹⁵ Undated note, Small storage room, drawer 23, box 1, J. F. Willumsen Museum archives. *The Great Relief* with its both grotesque and beauty-seeking, classical and modern figures can be seen as a synthesis of the contrasts to which Willumsen refers.

⁹⁶ E.g. "Willumsen og Danmark", in: *Dagens Nyheder. Nationaltidende*, 27.9.1928.

⁹⁷ That Willumsen fundamentally wants to gather Danish art together is seen among other places in a letter to Viggo Pedersen written in 1913, where he expresses deep disappointment: "For the last 10-15 years I have had an insatiable desire for inter-connectedness, for comradeship, for a common approach. I was filled with a strange 'rounded' feeling. I had to work towards establishing great ideals for art". As Willumsen also writes in this letter, he initiated and participated in a large number of associations, including the Association of Sculptors, the Association of Artist Painters, The Free Exhibition and the Association of Free Sculptors on this background. He feels that all this work has been wasted and will no longer exhibit in common exhibitions in Denmark. He also says that he is seriously considering leaving The Free Exhibition, so that at the age of 50 he can in earnest be "one of the free", stand entirely alone and no longer believe in "that foolish comradeship". However, Willumsen never carried out this threat. Letter from J. F. Willumsen to Viggo Pedersen, 10.5.1913, J. F. Willumsen Museum letter archives.

- [66] The question is whether the dualistic separation between the works in which the grotesque, the caricatured and the ugly are to be thought of as "pauses" between the major works, comes to an end with the "odd" works. Willumsen appears to take these works very seriously indeed and rejects the criticism directed at them. The works of his final years are biographical narratives about Willumsen's origins, his role as an artist and his everyday life together with selfportraits and portraits, and there is a striking unity in them – they refer to each other in various ways and are stylistically very homogeneous. In all the works the figures are exaggerated, the colours vibrant and the proportions distorted. So there is no different "beauty-filled" manner intended as a contrast to the grotesque, baroque or "odd". When we consider that from the 1930s Willumsen worked consistently on bringing about the establishment of the museum and most probably wished to produce "museum pieces" for its walls,⁹⁸ it makes even less sense to imagine that the works could be pure "relaxation".
- [67] Nor is there anything to suggest that Willumsen turns away from his "ethical purpose" in order to undertake purely formal experiments in his final years. The idea that art should have content is the very background to his opposition to abstract art, which he views as decoration. For instance, according to his friend Hans Bendix, he declared that, "if I were a tapestry, I would primarily be interested in abstractions".⁹⁹ Art without content is decoration, it is "handicraft" and not "a work of art".
- [68] There is much to indicate that with his "odd" works Willumsen seeks stylistic renewal without abandoning the idea that the works must also have a meaning that makes them into something more than decoration. What this content intentionally is supposed to be is unclear, but several of the paintings can be interpreted as the presentation of a modernist genius in crisis, who can no longer triumphantly stage his spectator as Diego Velazquez (1599-1660) does with the royal couple in *Las Meninas*, but instead presumptuously must force himself on the viewer's attention. Like a disappointed anti-hero Willumsen looks at us, stages himself in trivial settings and his expression brings to mind the humiliation the artist faced when fighting for his own museum rather than having it given to him on a plate.
- [69] Willumsen's challenge of conventions does not seem to be an intentional, highly reflective strategy, but seen through present-day eyes it is one of the aspects that make the late works interesting. They question the idealized notion of the artist as a superior subject and are the natural visual accompaniment to the entire discussion around the building of a museum dedicated to a single "artist genius". Whereas at the start of the 20th century Willumsen portrayed the liberated, independent woman in *A Mountaineer* or the fiery champion of people's rights in the *Hørup Monument*, the self-portraits and portraits of the

⁹⁸ Hjorth, J. F. *Willumsen i Europa*, 119.

⁹⁹ Hans Bendix, J. F. *Willumsen. Samvær og rejser*, Copenhagen 1982, 27.

late years reflect an anti-heroic subject without a fixed audience and a secure place in history.

[<top>](#)

The collapse of categories

[70] The art historians who in Willumsen's view have an understanding of his art see that he has wanted to achieve "something else" with it, as he puts it in a letter to his art dealer Alice Bloch in 1923:

It infuriates me to be told that I have no colour. Can people not see from such paintings that I have just as great an ability with colour as any other shoemaker painter? But I have sought something else with my work and I have been forced to alter the pitch in order to achieve this new quality. However, I think that critics like Carl V. Petersen and Moltesen are well on their way to understanding it. On the other hand a man like Wanscher makes a strangely foolish and uncomprehending impression on me. Foolish because he lacks the professional understanding of the essence of art. He does not understand the general truth that when you seek something new, something personal, it cannot look like what all the others are producing.¹⁰⁰

[71] Willumsen's enthusiasm for Moltesen is expressed in another letter to Alice Bloch, in which he comments on the book the art historian has written about him, published in 1923.¹⁰¹ Here Willumsen writes that 32 years elapsed before anyone was able to throw light on his "activity" from the 1890s.¹⁰² So Willumsen feels that with Moltesen's analyses he has been understood, and they must be read as interpretations far closer to Willumsen's own understanding of his art than for instance Sigurd Schultz's view of him as very reflective and calculating or Vilhelm Wanscher's interpretation of his works as conscious displacements in relation to classical art. Moltesen, on the other hand, emphasises the emotional aspect in the creation of the works. He talks of feelings, immediacy and the mystery of creation; of the embodiment of the deepest personal feelings.¹⁰³

[72] In addition, Moltesen's view of Willumsen's art has something in common with that of Petersen and another of Willumsen's great champions, Jan Zibrandtsen: They make no

¹⁰⁰ Letter from J. F. Willumsen to Alice Bloch, 19.12.1923, 3 Place Charles Felix, Nice, France (A.M.). Krogh, *Løvens breve*, 208-211.

¹⁰¹ Moltesen's book was originally only a review for a newspaper or periodical of Hjalmar Öhman's book on Willumsen from 1919, with which the artist was not content (Letter from J. F. Willumsen to Alice Bloch, 19.2.1919, 3 Place Charles Felix, Nice. Krogh, *Løvens breve*, 154-155). Unusually, Öhman's book was printed with Willumsen's own comments and notes decoratively inserted on the pages alongside Öhman's text. With the same print type and size as the main text, Willumsen's additions are printed on an equal footing with Öhman's words. Willumsen wanted Moltesen's text to be published as an appendix to Öhman's book, but it ended by being put out by another publisher. In contrast to Öhman's book, however, Willumsen's comments to the text are here only included in a small number of instances.

¹⁰² Letter from J. F. Willumsen to Alice Bloch, dated 18.3.1922, Nice. Krogh, *Løvens breve*, 197-199.

¹⁰³ Moltesen, *J. F. Willumsen*, 8 and 23 and elsewhere.

attempt to define his art in terms of style and period. In contrast Sigurd Schultz undertakes the division of Willumsen's art into the ten-year periods, which most Willumsen researchers have since taken as their starting point.¹⁰⁴ Moltesen instead emphasizes how categorisations and stylistic definitions prevent a complete understanding of the manifold qualities of art and that concepts of beauty, realism and various artistic "isms" do not cover the variations residing in art. A one-sided attitude to Willumsen will "lead to nothing but distortions" according to Moltesen and it is necessary as a receiver to seek the abundance of which Willumsen is a giver.¹⁰⁵ Moltesen draws parallels between Willumsen's art and various periods in the history of art: In his early years there are echoes from Egypt and the Middle Ages, later from Assyrian and ancient Greek art and the classics (all before 1900). Then comes the period after 1900 characterised by classical calm and balance, which Moltesen seems to believe is the artist's own personal style,¹⁰⁶ and finally comes the baroque as "the natural reaction" with *Fear of Nature. After the Storm No. 2* as the baroque image par excellence. The energy is now redoubled in the forms, which are thoroughly dynamic, and it all culminates, "the entire orchestra plays" in these works.¹⁰⁷

[73] The lack of a stylistic categorisation might perhaps have satisfied Willumsen, as it does not see him in the light of the influence of others or contemporary currents.¹⁰⁸ At the same time, however, he has not felt hurt by the parallels drawn between the art of earlier periods and his own.¹⁰⁹ But Moltesen also continues to work on the basis of a progressive movement away from the influence of others towards a personal style that is more or less described as an independent approach referred to as "subjectivism":

More than ever, Willumsen's powerful subjectivism becomes the driving force in his art¹¹⁰

and

¹⁰⁴ A tangible break with the tradition of dividing Willumsen's works into stylistic periods of some ten years each until the 1930s, when it becomes more diffuse, is undertaken by Jens Tang Kristensen in his article "Willumsens slør og silhuetter – et kongemord med stil", in: Anne Gregersen, *Et værk uden grænser*.

¹⁰⁵ Moltesen, *J. F. Willumsen*, 5-6.

¹⁰⁶ Moltesen, *J. F. Willumsen*, 27.

¹⁰⁷ Moltesen, *J. F. Willumsen*, 31-32.

¹⁰⁸ With reference to *Sun and Youth*, Moltesen writes: "It is an approach to 'impressionism' on which Willumsen otherwise had sworn 'everlasting war' [...]. However, in no way did he make use of 'impressionist' means in order to pay tribute to a dominant fashionable movement simply because this could not be painted any differently. So any predicate can be removed." Moltesen, *J. F. Willumsen*, 29.

¹⁰⁹ In his letter to Alice Bloch, in which he expresses his dissatisfaction with Moltesen's analyses of his art, Willumsen writes, however, that after studying "primitive forms of art", he can definitely say that he has sought to achieve something quite different with his art. 18.3.1922. Krogh, *Løvens breve*, 198.

¹¹⁰ Moltesen, *J. F. Willumsen*, 33.

[everything in Willumsen's art is] an emanation of his own seething depths.¹¹¹

[74] According to Moltesen, everything must give way to Willumsen's urge for expression, and he becomes "less than ever a colourist for gourmets".¹¹² Moltesen concludes his homage to Willumsen by arguing that his life force has been liberated over recent years as though he has been in the grasp of some demon. His hatred of all petty things has turned him away from the surrounding world and made him "twice as sharp and twice as flaming".¹¹³ Instead of dividing Willumsen's art into categories, he employs the idea of the artist as a genius, aloofly pouring forth his innermost being and breaking down all boundaries, but at the same time being the unifying principle who ensures totality in the oeuvre.

[75] Suspicion of the stylistic divisions and the idea of the artist himself as the consistent theme throughout is also found in the art historian and later director of Skagens Museum, Jan Zibrandtsen, who is moreover one of the few to appreciate the whole of Willumsen's oeuvre including the late works. In his book on Danish painting from 1948, he writes of the difficulty of employing a range of "isms" in order to determine the value of a work of art and of the indeterminate boundaries of such "isms". It is ultimately the artist's individual power of expression that brings the works together irrespective of categorisations.¹¹⁴

[76] So it seems that a picture is emerging in which the art historians who support Willumsen all the way, even when they consider his works to be bizarre, do so with a nuanced view of stylistic categories together with an over-all understanding of Willumsen as an artistic genius. With this, they place themselves half way between a late modern confrontation with the stylistic divisions of modernism and a classical modernist idea of the genius with its roots way back in romanticism.

[<top>](#)

Willumsen and the narrative of modernism

[77] Where is Willumsen to be placed in relation to the great modernist narrative of the development of art from naturalistic figuration to abstract expressionism and turn from representation to art that has art as its subject and seeks autonomy? Willumsen maintains a figurative idiom, but radically distorts, twists and renews this idiom. In his own letters, notes etc. and in virtually every presentation of him Willumsen is described as an artist who experiments, tests the boundaries, seeks new ways, is highly original and difficult to define.¹¹⁵ This is exactly the same description which is often applied when

¹¹¹ Moltesen, *J. F. Willumsen*, 36.

¹¹² Moltesen, *J. F. Willumsen*, 36.

¹¹³ Moltesen, *J. F. Willumsen*, 39.

¹¹⁴ Jan Zibrandtsen, *Moderne dansk maleri*, Copenhagen 1948, 242-43.

¹¹⁵ It is typical that two titles of exhibitions in recent years should focus on Willumsen as a breaker of boundaries: *Willumsen. Over grænser (Willumsen. Beyond Limits)* (Ordrupgaard and Musée

acclaiming the avant-garde movements of the 20th century. Nevertheless, he is not viewed as an avant-garde artist (apart from his role as a modernist frontrunner in the 1890s), neither in his own time or subsequently, and the late works have been placed outside the modernist canon virtually from the time when they were created to the present day.

- [78] Possible reasons for this emerge when we see the dual qualities that are so striking in Willumsen's works: the works are serious and banal, in interplay with both historical portrait painting and the advertisement snapshot, and they simultaneously cultivate the artist as subject and manifest the disintegration of the modern subject by staging it as anti-heroic. Along with this duality they transcend the stylistic categories of the 20th century and defy stylistic definition.
- [79] In particular, their link to both art history and popular culture appears to be a key to an understanding of the position occupied by these works. They challenge the categorical distinction between high culture and popular culture that Andreas Huyssen has called the "Great Divide". Huyssen argues that modernism establishes itself by excluding mass culture, by which it fears to be contaminated. Hence the l'art pour l'art movements, which are first seen in symbolism, aestheticism and art nouveau and then again in abstract expressionism, which is canonised as the ultimate modernist art.¹¹⁶ L'art pour l'art is the battle for the autonomy of a work of art at a time when it has just ceased to exist.¹¹⁷
- [80] Willumsen seems to agree with *The Great Divide*, as, among other things, is confirmed by a statement that art has experienced its death in all artistic realms. In his day, writes Willumsen, mechanical techniques have destroyed manual work. Photographic reproduction, gramophones and pianolas and cinemas have won over woodcuts and copper engravings, live music and theatre.¹¹⁸ There exists no documentation that Willumsen went to the cinema or in any way was interested in the popular culture of his time. But at the same time as he turns against mass culture and its reproductive techniques, his illustrations from newspapers and periodicals etc. from the beginning of the century are witnesses to an early established interest in the mass culture of his time. A solid "proof" that Willumsen referred to these clippings or was directly inspired by d'Orsay 2006) and *Et værk uden grænser. J. F. Willumsens maleri "Kongesønnens bryllup" 1888 og 1949 (A Work without Limits. J. F. Willumsens Painting "The Wedding of the King's Son" 1888 and 1949)* (The J. F. Willumsen Museum 2009).
- ¹¹⁶ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1986, 7-10.
- ¹¹⁷ Huyssen argues that the "historical avantgarde aimed at developing an alternative relationship between high art and mass culture and thus should be distinguished from modernism, which for the most part insisted on the inherent hostility between high and low", but nevertheless the avant-garde was absorbed by modernist high culture eventually becoming synonymous with modernism and its high-low dichotomy. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, viii.
- ¹¹⁸ Note dated 16.2.1920. Small storage room, drawer 223, box 1, J. F. Willumsen Museum archives.

popular culture in his late years has not been found and the resemblance in the style of the late paintings to the one found in popular culture in the 1940s and 1950s must also be related to the fact that Disney and other production companies heavily drew on elder art as El Greco just like Willumsen did. However, if one merely relates to Willumsen's self-staging statements and outspoken intentions the interpretation of his works becomes very limited. If we only follow the tracks laid down by the artist himself, Willumsen is the lonely regenerator of figuration, independent and uninfluenced. Conversely, if we look at the works and the popular culture of the period 1930-1960, there are similarities, which suggests that the artist also in his late years didn't discriminate so roughly between "high" and "low" when finding sources for developing his figurative expression and that he to some extent – consciously or not – was influenced by a pictorial language that soon after would be drastically undertaken by the pop art movement.

- [81] The resemblances between Willumsen's late works and the visual expression of elements from mass culture can explain why the label "kitsch" is sometimes used in the assessment of them. Kitsch in art appears to arise just when the category of "art" with its traditions and norms is combined with the trivial, unoriginal and "unserious" in popular culture. The category of "kitsch" is historical and must be seen in relation to art's loss of function in modernity and to the radical distinction between high and low art, which Clement Greenberg articulated so famously in 1939 in his essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch". Greenberg's link between popular culture and kitsch are the logical result of his thesis about how painting as media gradually purifies itself and naturally develops from naturalistic to abstract. As references to the real world are gradually cut out what remains is a preoccupation with form, colour, space and surface. It is a closed circle, whereas kitsch art is closely connected with popular culture and the commercial, and ultimately is a result of totalitarian oppression.¹¹⁹ In practice, however, the categories overflow into each other, and as Huyssen points out it is actually the early avant-garde movements that are later absorbed into fine culture that are the first to destabilise the dichotomy.¹²⁰

[<top>](#)

¹¹⁹ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitsch" (1939), in: Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford and Massachusetts 1992, 531.

¹²⁰ According to Huyssen, a second attack comes from postmodernism, which similarly rejects the legitimacy of the distinction and breaks it down by incorporating elements from popular culture into the realm of art. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, viii. Exhibitions such as *High and Low. Modern Art & Popular Culture* in the Museum of Modern Art in New York and more recently *Il était une fois Walt Disney* in the Galeries nationales du Grand Palais in Paris start out from the ill-defined borderlines. The two exhibitions had in fact opposite starting points: *High and Low* sought mainly to make clear how avant-garde art has made use of the mass mediated visual expressions of popular culture, whereas *Il était une fois Walt Disney* rather turned its attention to the significance of art history for the presentation of the Disney films. In one way or the other, the overlaps are clear, and the Greenberg distinction is artificial. Nevertheless, it has been largely maintained in the narratives of modernism enunciated by art history and has played its part in sidelining the art that has not maintained its "purity".

Bad Painting

[82] The lack of "purity" in Willumsen's late works is interesting to consider in relation to the concept of Bad Painting. The term was first established in an exhibition by that name in 1978 in the New Museum in New York, where the curator Marcia Tucker had gathered a number of American painters, all of whom were working with the medium at a time when it was largely seen as outdated – this alone making them "Bad" according to Tucker. In the exhibition catalogue, she further defined Bad Painting as works that remain outside the conventions for high art laid down both by history and current fashion describing it as

figurative work that defies, either deliberately or by virtue of disinterest, the classic canons of good taste, draftmanship, acceptable source material, rendering or illusionistic representation.¹²¹

[83] Hereby Bad Painting is not just unskilled or aesthetically displeasing art, but art that is in opposition to prevailing values thereby making it a historically dependent and elastic category. Tucker establishes Bad Painting as painting that removes modernist art from questions of progress and originality to an interrogation of norms for artistic quality. The exhibition heralded the return of painting in the 1980s and the general problematisation of the avant-garde as a phenomenon and was thus of great significance.

[84] Since then Bad Painting has been taken up and examined by artists and curators, who in exhibitions have proposed different genealogies of Bad Painting as a phenomenon. In Denmark the exhibition *Kitsch bli'r kunst (Kitsch Turns into Art)* in 1992¹²² included works otherwise characterized as Bad Painting by Asger Jorn and Francis Picabia together with a broad range of newer Danish art and it discussed what kitsch is by affirming its volatility as a category and its connection to popular culture and concepts of copy and original.¹²³ The exhibition "Bad-Bad. That is a Good Excuse" in Kunsthalle Baden-Baden in 1999 likewise included works by Asger Jorn and Francis Picabia as well as by William Copley, Jean Michel Basquiat and Julian Schnabel among many others whereby it examined Bad Painting as a certain painterly strategy occurring in formally different ways.¹²⁴

[85] More recently, the research and exhibition project entitled *Bad Painting/good art* in the MUMOK in Vienna (2008),¹²⁵ proposed a thorough historical overview of the phenomenon, drawing lines back as far as Manet's *Olympia* (1863).¹²⁶ In the catalogue accompanying

¹²¹ Marcia Tucker, *"Bad" Painting*, The New Museum, 14.1-28.2.1978, exh. cat. New York 1978, unpaginated [5].

¹²² *Kitsch bli'r kunst*. Kunstforeningen 18.1-3.5.1992. Herning Kunstmuseum 21.3-3.5.1992.

¹²³ Anneli Fuchs, "Kitsch – kunstens Klondyke. Om forbindelsen mellem kitsch og kunst", in: Anneli Fuchs and Charlotte Sabroe, eds., *Kitsch bli'r kunst*, 6-8.

¹²⁴ Curated by Margrit Brehm and Axel Heil. Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden 18.4-20.6.1999.

¹²⁵ *Bad Painting/good art*, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (MUMOK), 6.6.-12.10.2008.

¹²⁶ The art historian Stefan Neuer argues that all good modernist painting was once "bad": innovation and originality in modernism meant seriously abandoning painterly skills; Courbet, Manet, the Impressionists, Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso all painted badly in relation to traditional

the exhibition, the curators Susanne Neuburger and Eva Badura-Triska define Bad Painting as an "anachronism" which is both anti-classical and anti-modernist in its strategies. Thereby Bad Painting gave way to an alternative model to the progressive, abstract movements at a time when these were becoming established and academic. Neuburger affirms that by virtue of its being opposed to both academic and avant-garde norms, Bad Painting is a "revolutionary phenomenon" critical of modernist ideas on evolution, historicity, irreversibility and retroaction.¹²⁷ This destabilises the avant-garde utopia that progress is achieved by overcoming the old and, as Eva Badura-Triska argues in her article, Bad Painting can be viewed as a strategy for confronting the dictates of the avant-garde.¹²⁸

[86] So it is not formal qualities that make it "Bad", but rather strategies and methods. It is painting deeply anchored in the history of painting, which Bad Painting acknowledges, but at the same time breaks with by means of antiquated styles and techniques along with kitsch, appropriation, quotation and pastiche in order to create incomplete, confused and overcrowded painting containing elements of parody, irony and humour.¹²⁹ In this respect, the curators at MUMOK are in conflict with Marcia Tucker's understanding of Bad Painting as linked to an iconoclastic tradition mainly critical of painting. For Neuburger and Badura-Triska Bad Painting is painting embedded in painting. Painting that examines the potential and possibilities of painting so thoroughly that it finally questions painting as a medium, but on the basis of an inherent loyalty to the medium.¹³⁰ Nor do Neuburger and Badura-Triska define Bad Painting as figurative art, as Tucker does, but on the contrary they present transitions and shifts between the abstract and the figurative as a Bad Painting strategy. It *is*, however, mainly figurative painting, often with a traditional style that constitutes the phenomenon. Precisely the figurative element means that the Bad Painting artists must battle with both academic traditionalism and accusations that they are conservative traditionalists.¹³¹

[87] Neuburger and Badura-Triska state that Bad Painting occurs in limited, often quite brief periods during an artist's career. An example is René Magritte's *période vache* in 1947-48, when he paints a series of 30 grotesque and roughly finished works in various styles, standards. In time, as modernist artists laid down new standards for artistic quality, their works came to be seen as good. Stefan Neuner, "Picabia's Concept of Irony", in: Eva Badura-Triska and Susanne Neuburger, eds., *Bad Painting/good art*, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (MUMOK), 6.6.-12.10.2008, exh. cat., Vienna 2008, 110-12.

¹²⁷ Susanne Neuburger, "The First and the Last Painting?", in: Badura-Triska and Neuburger, *Bad Painting/good art*, 12. Neuburger here makes use of the French art historian Thierry de Duves' ideas on the norms of modernism.

¹²⁸ Eva Badura-Triska, "Who Becomes a Bad painter, When, Why, and in What Sense?", in: Badura-Triska and Neuburger, *Bad Painting/good art*, 48.

¹²⁹ Neuburger, "The First and the Last Painting?", 16; Badura-Triska, "Who Becomes a Bad Painter, When, Why and in What Sense?", 50.

¹³⁰ Badura-Triska, "Who Becomes a Bad painter, When, Why, and in What Sense?", 48.

¹³¹ Badura-Triska, "Who Becomes a Bad painter, When, Why, and in What Sense?", 48.

thereby ironising over the avant-garde's idea of progression. In line with Willumsen's later works, these have been marginalised in exhibitions and literature on Magritte. Asger Jorn – whom Neuburger and Badura-Triska consider the European father of Bad Painting – can be said to engage with the phenomena in his homage to kitsch and the banal in the text "Intimate Banalities", published in *Helhesten* in 1941¹³² and later on with his defigurations and modifications from the period 1959-62. By overpainting a series of kitschy "shoddy paintings", Jorn mixed the academic and the avant-garde, the naturalistic and the expressive, popular culture (the shoddy pictures) and the fine culture into which the avant-garde had developed. It is significant for Bad Painting that the modifications do not spoil the pictures, but precisely modify them, which must be seen in the light of comments by Jorn such as

Keep your memories
but divert them (détournez-les)
so that they correspond to your time.¹³³

- [88] As opposed to the modernist preoccupations with purity of style, progression and innovation, the modifications interrogate questions of kitsch, devaluation of values and "peinture détournée" as the works were originally called when exhibited in the Galerie Rive Gauche in Paris in 1959.¹³⁴
- [89] Another "Father figure" in the genealogy of Bad Painting as proposed by Neuburger and Badura-Triska is Francis Picabia, who likewise questions the avant-garde dogmas when in the middle of the 1920s he breaks with dadaism and surrealism and over the following years constantly changes style, reuses motifs from art history and paints a series of pictures copied directly from postcards and pin-up photographs in periodicals.¹³⁵
- [90] Even though Picabia and others share a strategy involving irony, provocation and deliberate disappointment of the public's expectations, which Willumsen doesn't engage in,¹³⁶ further attention should be given to the concept of Bad Painting as a catalyst for a rereading of Willumsen's late works. The focus on the history of painting, the literal content and personal statements on the world as well as the lack of clear style and the kitschy element present in them brings them close to the definitions of Bad Painting

¹³² Asger Jorn, "Intime Banaliteter", in: *Helhesten* 1 (1941), 75-79.

¹³³ Translation based on Annemarie Horsman's Danish translation of Jorn's French foreword "Peinture Détournée" in the catalogue to the exhibition *Modifications*, reprinted in *Banaliteter, Passepartout*, vol. 3, no. 5, ed. Department of Art History, Aarhus 1995, 13.

¹³⁴ Anneli Fuchs, "Asger Jorns 'Modifikationer'. Til belysning af situationismens æstetik", in: *Banaliteter*, 22.

¹³⁵ The features, which Picabia and Willumsen have in common are worthy of a more thorough explanation and will be developed in a PhD thesis by the author.

¹³⁶ As Stefan Neuner suggests, irony implies an element of distance from the subject. This distance is difficult to find in Willumsen, who appears to relate seriously, literally and intimately to his works even though it is possible to read humour into them. Neuburger, "The First and the Last Painting?", 20, 22.

proposed by Neuburger and Badura-Triska and others since Marcia Tucker coined the term in 1978. Like Bad Painting, Willumsen's late works question the dogmas of media specificity with its narrative content and upsets the possibility of a linear development in art. By way of contrast to the position that both the avant-garde and traditional academic painting have adopted, these works have the effect of "impure" visual expressions balancing between categories and in a postmodern manner denoting the collapse of these categories. Also the interest in mannerism – which in itself can be considered as a phenomenon of Bad Painting – is a link between them. As mentioned in the catalogue accompanying New Museum's exhibition "Bad" Painting the formal features in composition and the use of colour in the works of for example American "Bad Painter" James Albertson are informed by 16th century mannerist painting and Albertson even states that mannerism is the period he likes best in the history of art.¹³⁷

- [91] At the same time, there are clear differences in the strategic use of painting to criticise painting in many of the Bad Painting artists discussed by Neuburger and Badura-Triska and in Willumsen, who, in the late years, mainly seems interested in exploring what painting can do within the representational regime and doesn't pronounce a single word pointing to any conscious use of the material to ironise on it, criticise it or problematise it. Nevertheless, this is exactly what the works do.

[<top>](#)

The significance of the late works

- [92] The late works are rather like advertisements that irritate you, but which you remember, and they balance between parody and pathos, as Per Kirkeby has put it. They are impossible to overlook and point to a cultural state where the only way of getting the viewer's attention is to overwhelm him or her with sensory impressions and effects that are crying out to be seen.¹³⁸ Like the religious icons, Willumsen collected, the works seem to contain everything within themselves and their fluorescent monochrome backgrounds lead nowhere. Original and formally inventive within the figurative regime they nevertheless resonate the word "kitsch" which, as argued here, may have to do with their closeness to expressions within popular culture. They can be read as a recognition of the loss of the artwork's autonomy, which in contrast to abstract expressionism and earlier l'art pour l'art movements do not desperately seek to maintain the "great divide", but actually ignore the existence of a distinction. With pitiful fervour the works replace the triumphant subject with the anti-heroic individual, whose exaggerated, "ugly" and distorted expression has a basic misanthropic tone.

¹³⁷ Tucker, *"Bad" Painting*, unpaginated [7].

¹³⁸ The art historian Henrik Holm writes about this element in connection with the trilogy *Titian Dying* and sees the need to "cry out" your message as evidence of the impossibility of an immediate, authentic experience of reality. Unpublished chapter in the curator Henrik Holm's Ph.D. dissertation, *Analyser af hovedværker i dansk billedkunst fra N.A. Abildgaard til Asger Jorn*, 2005.

[93] A relevant question in regard to the late works is if they contain painterly qualities we today can open our eyes to or if they are of no interest apart from their function as mirrors reflecting our conventions and norms of good taste, artistic quality and canon by being just not that. This question can best be answered by examining their potential for interpretation and seeing what actually happens when they are taken up from the storage rooms of the J. F. Willumsen Museum and put into play in monographic or group exhibitions as it is planned to do in the coming years. As their reception shows, it is in any case difficult to brush them aside as indifferent, and in this connection it is interesting to pay attention to what the curator responsible for the first Bad Painting exhibition, Marcia Tucker, writes in the catalogue about a visitor's response to one of the "Bad Painters". The visitor starts by saying that these are the worst paintings he has ever seen, but an hour later he is still in the gallery, intrigued by them.¹³⁹

[<top>](#)

¹³⁹ Tucker, *"Bad" Painting*, unpaginated [5].