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Anders Zorn

A European Artist Seduces America

By John O'Hern

Anders Zorn's first visit to the United States was an eventful one. He had been named Special Commissioner of Fine Arts for the Swedish Pavilion at the 1893 Columbian World Exhibition in Chicago. "I get on well in America and with Americans," he declared. "Their frank, straightforward manner suits my nature. I've never really been able to stand our urban Europeans' ceremonious style and artificial customs."

Visiting the World's Fair from Boston were Mr. and Mrs. John L. "Jack" Gardner. "Mrs. Jack" was intrigued by a painting in the Swedish Pavilion and asked a man standing nearby if he knew the artist. Anders Zorn introduced himself and Mrs. Gardner is said to have replied, "Yourself, indeed! Well, I feel sure we shall soon be enemies...or else very, very fast friends. You shall come today for tea."

The following year Zorn visited the Gardners at their home on Beacon Street in Boston and produced an etching of Mrs. Gardner that neither of them thought was successful. Later in the year Zorn and his wife visited the Gardners for several weeks at Palazzo Barbaro in Venice where he continued to struggle to create a portrait. One evening Mrs. Gardner stepped onto a balcony to look at the fireworks over the Grand Canal. When she turned back to the room she told the party they needed to see the fireworks. Zorn

exclaimed, "Stay just as you are! That is the way I want to paint you."

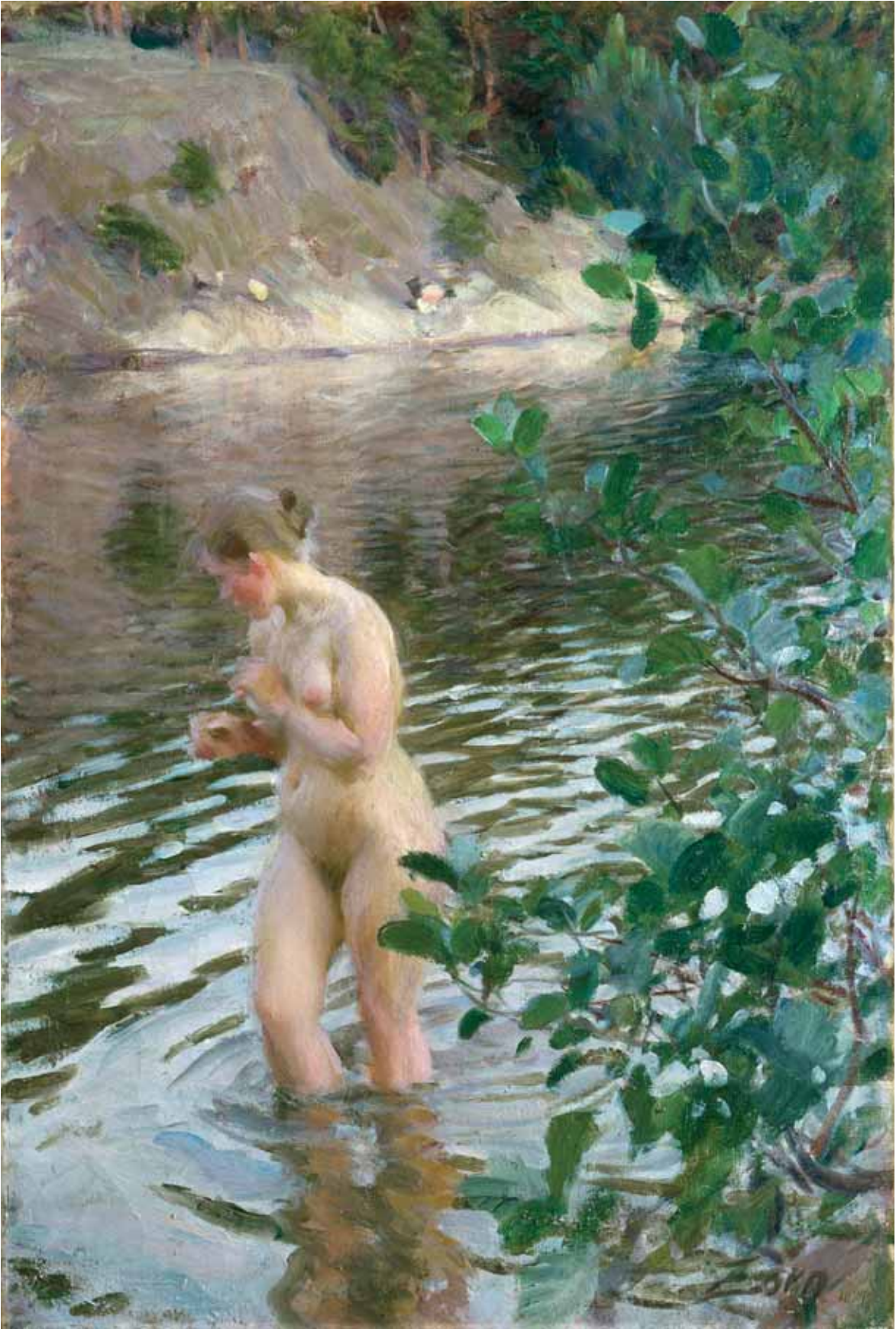
Later Mrs. Gardner described the portrait (*Isabella Stewart Gardner in Venice*) as "...astounding! A night scene...I am on the balcony, stepping down into the *salone* pushing both sides of the windows back with my arms raised up and spread wide! Exactly like me."

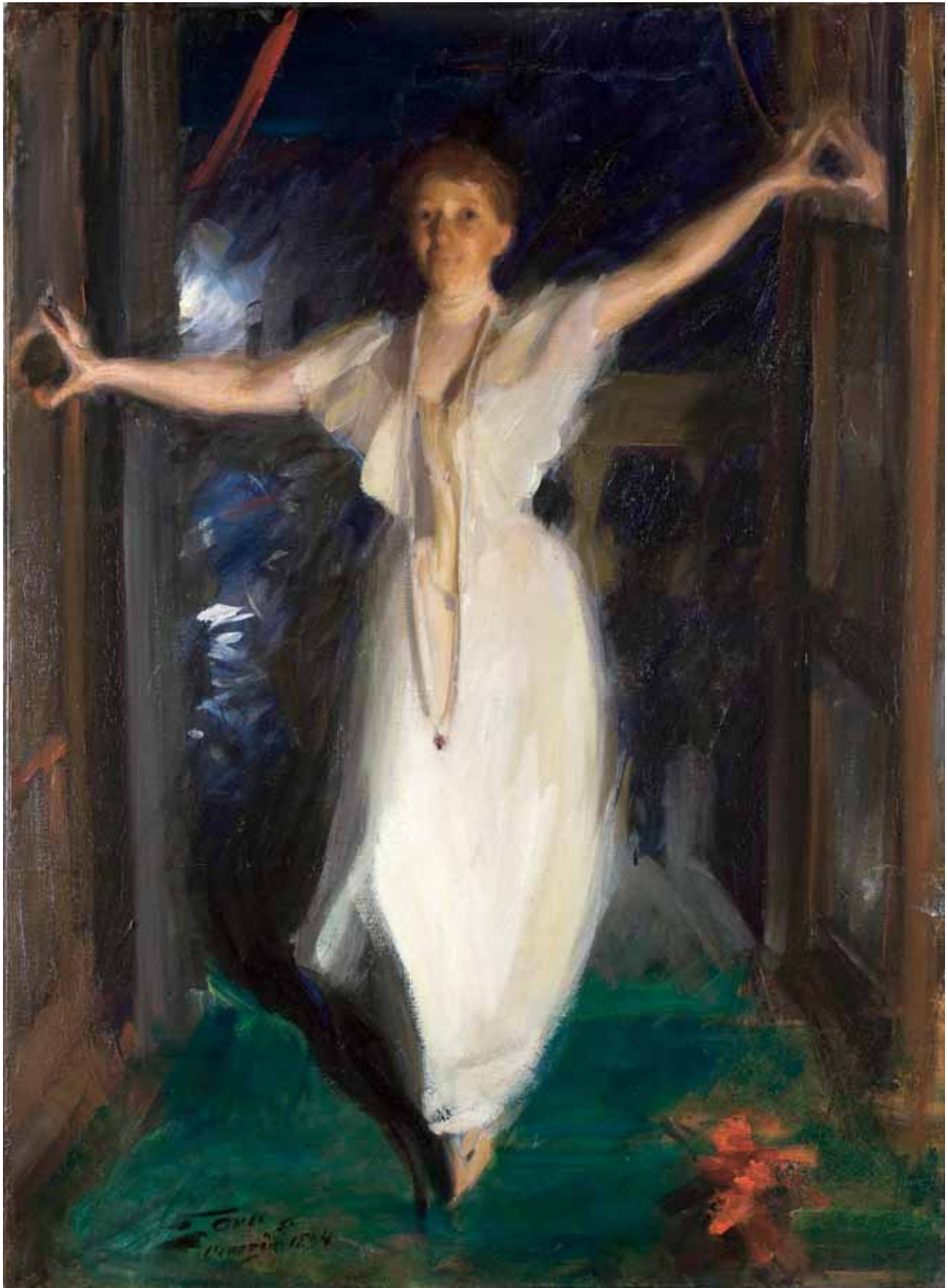
John Singer Sargent also had struggled to capture Mrs. Gardner in a portrait. She thought the result was the best the painter had ever done but her husband declared, "It looks like hell, but looks like you." He asked that the painting not be shown during his lifetime and it remained in a private room until Mrs. Gardner's death in 1924.

The Gardners had discussed leaving their extensive art collection to Boston as a fine art museum. After her husband's sudden death in 1898 she acquired property and built Fenway Court, a Venetian palazzo that is now the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

Zorn became one of the most successful artists of the Belle Epoque. Today, however, he is mostly forgotten outside his native Sweden. *Anders Zorn: A European Artist Seduces America* is an exhibition at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum that "investigates how Zorn became an international artist who set the groundwork for modern art...highlighting the role of Gardner as a most influential patron of Anders Zorn in America."

Opposite Page: **Anders Zorn (1860-1920)**, *Frileuse; Shivering Girl*, 1894, oil on canvas, 35.8 x 26".
Prins Eugen Waldemarsudde, Stockholm, Sweden.







Anders Zorn (1860-1920), *The Morning Toilet*, about 1888, oil on canvas, 23.6 x 14.2". Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, MA.

Omnibus, the painting the Gardners acquired at the World's Fair in Chicago, is included among the 24 paintings in the exhibition. The paintings are complemented by drawings, etchings, photographs and artifacts relating to the artist and his patron.

Although Zorn may have been forgotten by a fickle art world, his influence on other artists has never stopped.

T. Allen Lawson recalls that when he was in art school in Chicago, Sargent had been made almost god-like. There was a debate about “who is better”—Sargent, Sorolla, or Zorn? “When you get to that level,” Lawson says, “who’s to say who’s better than whom? It’s astounding how much they knew and how well they could paint. There is a difference between a painting and a work of art. The deciding factor is what the creator is able to put into the work. It’s always much more than simply going out and rendering what’s in front of you.

“Their best paintings,” Lawson continues, “are when they’re painting what they’re familiar with and what they really love. Obviously, they spent a great deal of time observing and thinking. The more you know about something the more interested you become in the subject you’re painting. There is a difference between an oak tree and a maple tree. There is a difference between a pine and a fir.” Looking at Zorn’s paintings, Lawson pointed out the artist’s command and use of light, the level of detail where he needed it and the suggestion of forms where he didn’t—and “little shots of color” just where they need to be.

Zorn once said, “Where others found inspiration in dreams I found it in nature. Many have called that a lack of imagination. I gladly call it a love of reality.” He is known for his limited palette, which can be seen in his portrait of Mrs. Gardner in Venice with its subdued color enlivened by a flash of red fireworks in the sky and a reflection on the floor beneath her feet.

“Where others found inspiration in dreams I found it in nature. Many have called that a lack of imagination. I gladly call it a love of reality.” — Anders Zorn

Opposite page: **Anders Zorn (1860-1920)**, *Isabella Stewart Gardner in Venice*, 1894, oil on canvas, 35.8 x 26". Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, MA.



Scott Christensen, *California Coast*, oil on canvas, 30 x 40". Private collection. Courtesy the artist.

Scott Christensen was inspired by Zorn's palette and his edges. "Being able to view an entire body of work of Anders Zorn in Sweden," he explains, "I was inspired by the harmony and control he obtained with the use of a very limited palette. I took on a similar palette with just a few shifts. I have substituted permanent bright red, similar to Zorn's vermilion; it blends both warm and cool. I use a cadmium yellow lemon instead of yellow ocher and ultramarine blue instead of black, which gives me a broader range. These limitations help me to achieve a more cohesive and consistent painting. You are forced to make decisions about the temperature based on the relationship of one color to another. Such as, is it a warmer red or a cooler red?"

"Not only was Zorn unique in his palette, but he demonstrated very deliberate brushwork," adds Christensen. "You will see layers of paint; continuous reworking and close attention to edges. Oftentimes I revisit a painting repeatedly to achieve the desired effect."

Describing his painting *California Coast* Christensen notes he uses a limited palette, but added ruby violet to get cooler reds that would "help complement the green that is so intrusive on the California coastline."

Jeremy Lipking had a similar experience when he discovered Zorn. "When I first learned about Zorn there were a couple things right away that fascinated me,



Jeremy Lipking, *Reclining Nude*, oil, 46 x 54"

first was his edges. The way he could suggest movement and depth in a painting using a combination of hard, lost and soft edges. He was certainly not the first one to use soft and hard edges in painting," Lipking remarks, "but he had a very unique way of using them to their extremes to show both movement and create depth."

Lipking also was intrigued by Zorn's simplicity. "He usually used a limited palette making for limited color in his work but it didn't stop with his color, he also limited his values and the amount of detail he included," explains Lipking. He also adds that at first glance Zorn's work looks almost accidental with the paint landing on the canvas in "correct color and in the appropriate spot." Zorn's compositions, as Lipking makes note, were actually planned out and designed to lead the eye around to the places he wanted the viewer to look.



The Gardners and Zorns in gondolas, Venice, 13 Oct. 1894, photograph, 9.4 x 12.3". Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, MA.

"He did a huge number of sketches and studies of water among other things," says Lipking. "These studies are what enabled him to make these complicated subjects look so elegant and effortlessly painted."

These artists are among many seduced by Zorn's genius over the past century. The seductive vitality of his work can be felt again in this important exhibition at Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. ●



John O'Hern, who has retired after 30 years in the museum business, specifically as the Executive Director and Curator of the Arnot Art Museum, Elmira, N.Y., is the originator of the internationally acclaimed Representing Representation exhibitions

which promote realism in its many guises. John was chair of the Artists Panel of the New York State Council on the Arts. He writes for gallery publications around the world, including regular monthly features on Art Market Insights and on Sculpture in Western Art Collector magazine.

T. Allen Lawson, *The Return Home*, oil on linen, 30 x 21".
Courtesy Simpson Gallagher Gallery.

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Where: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum,
280 The Fenway, Boston, MA 02115
When: February 28-May 13, 2013
Information: (617) 566-1401,
www.gardnermuseum.org