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“Painting Tranquility: Masterworks by Vilhelm Hammershøi from SMK – The National Gallery of Denmark,” an exhibition of masterpieces by celebrated Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi, opened at Scandinavia House on October 17, 2015.

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The selection of 24 paintings examines the practice of an artist who defied tradition and conventional expectations with his enigmatic artworks, eventually earning recognition as one of Denmark’s greatest artists of the modern era.

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On view through March of 2016, it was curated by Dr. Kasper Monrad, chief curator at the Statens Museum for Kunst/ National Gallery of Denmark (SMK) in Copenhagen and a leading expert on Danish and European painting of the 19th century.

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Drawn from SMK’s extensive collection, “Painting Tranquility” features artworks from the main genres in which Hammershøi worked: monumental landscapes, intimate portraits, and the quiet home interiors for which he earned the title “de stille stuers maler,” or “the painter of tranquil rooms.”

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Prominently featured in two other recent Scandinavia House exhibitions — “Luminous Modernism: Scandinavian Art Comes to America, 1912” in 2011, and “Danish Paintings from the Golden Age to the Modern Breakthrough: Selections from the Collection of Ambassador John L. Loeb Jr.” in 2013 — Hammershøi’s work has long been considered visionary in its grasp of the modernist aesthetic.

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The exhibition was accompanied by a range of programming, including a series of international short and feature-length films; Hammershøi-inspired concerts; an artist talk, symposium, and lectures; kid-friendly workshops led by art educators; and weekly gallery tours.

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It was also accompanied by a 124-page illustrated catalogue, featuring an essay by curator Kasper Monrad.

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As Dr. Monrad said of the exhibition, “While Hammershøi’s work reflects the special identity of modern Scandinavian art, the viewer is offered no single clue by the artist—we are never sure of his intentions. The experience becomes a contemplative one in which viewers create their own interpretations.”

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Spanning the early years of Vilhelm Hammershøi’s career, when his unorthodox work was met with bafflement by the public and awe by his contemporaries, to his later years as an internationally recognized master, “Painting Tranquility” illuminates the artist’s trailblazing style.

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While Hammershøi’s choice of subject matter was seemingly typical of the time, his depictions defied conventional expectations that were steeped in the tradition of Royal Danish Academy

of Fine Arts. Rather than adhere to realistic interpretations, light and air play major roles, taking on an almost physical tactility.

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Using unusual or irregular compositional strategies, removing people from street scenes, omitting detail and narrative, and embracing a muted, subtle palette, he reimagined the landscapes, interiors, and portraits of the Nordic artistic tradition.

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Hammershøi is best known for interiors of middle-class homes, a popular genre in 19th-century Denmark.

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In “Interior Strandgade, Sunlight on the Floor” and “Interior, An Old Stove,” exquisitely modulated sunlight falls on the floors, walls, and doors of Hammershøi’s Copenhagen apartment.

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In contrast to his own comfortably furnished rooms, he substituted sparsely decorated interiors, creating a lack of detail and evacuated narrative that evoke an atmospheric vagueness, both contemplative and claustrophobic.

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This was a departure from his contemporaries, who typically painted interiors that suggested a story unfolding and conveyed warmth and harmony.

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In his portraits, Hammershøi dispensed with many of the standard elements of the genre, rendering his paintings unusual and unfathomable to his contemporary audiences. Eschewing commissions, his subjects were almost exclusively his immediate family and close friends.

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In his “Portrait of Ida Ilsted,” he chose to depict his future wife sitting idly in a bare room, an indeterminate look on her face, eliminating the details traditionally used to suggest a sitter’s personality, such as portraying an activity or a particular moment.

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Hammershøi took a similarly novel approach to his landscapes and paintings featuring local architecture.

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In depictions of Copenhagen like “The Buildings of the Asiatic Company,” he depopulates the busy street scenes favored by Danish proponents of naturalism and realism, inventing a quiet, static city devoid of movement.

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In “View of Jægersborg Allé” and other landscapes, he rejects the romantic renderings of untouched countryside favored by Nordic naturalists, opting instead to paint isolated scenes of diffused tree tops and dissolved bands of color.

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While Hammershøi's work received much acclaim during his lifetime, after his death in 1916, it was largely forgotten outside of Scandinavia. Following several key exhibitions in the 1980s in Copenhagen, Washington, and New York, notably Kirk Varnedoe's landmark "Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting, 1880-1910," in 1982, appreciation for his work expanded.

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His paintings can now be found in private and public collections in Copenhagen, Paris, New York, Hamburg, London, and Tokyo. Having steadily collected Hammershøi's work since his lifetime, SMK currently has among the most comprehensive collection of his work in the world.

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Despite the growth of Hammershøi's international popularity in recent years, "Painting Tranquility" was at the time the first exhibition in New York exclusively dedicated to his work in over 15 years.

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Scandinavia House was glad to have been able to provide visitors with an opportunity to slow down, look closely at these captivating paintings, and enjoy a moment of quiet reflection.

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As his teacher, the painter Peder Severin Krøyer, once wrote, "I have a pupil who paints most oddly. I do not understand him, but believe he is going to be important and do not try to influence him."