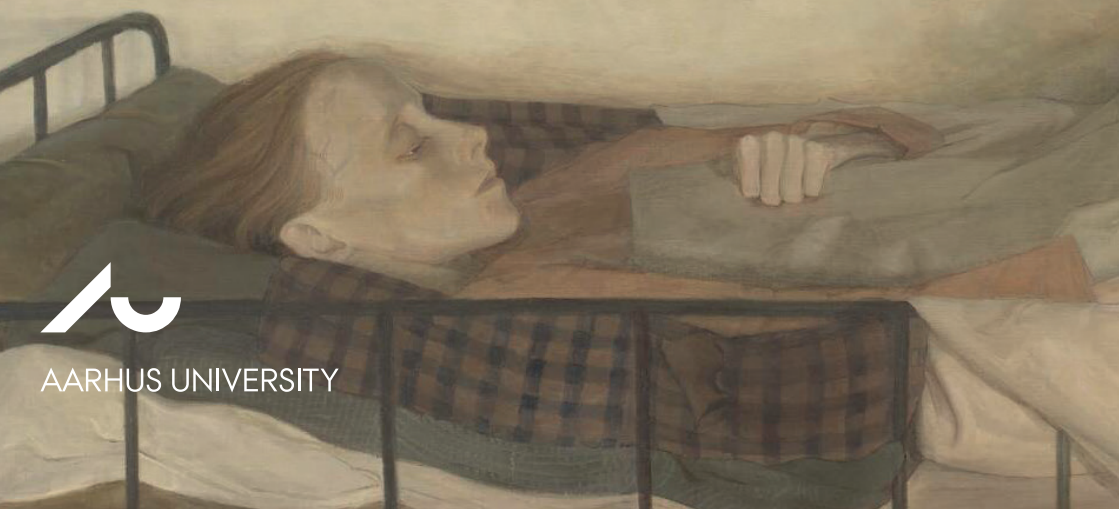




**More Than Walls: Walls of  
Ambiguity and the Crisis of the  
Figure in Late 19th Century  
Scandinavian Interior Painting**

PhD. Dissertation by Ellen Egemose



AARHUS UNIVERSITY

# MORE THAN WALLS: WALLS OF AMBIGUITY AND THE CRISIS OF THE FIGURE IN LATE 19TH CEN- TURY SCANDINAVIAN INTERIOR PAINTING

**The author's introduction to the PhD dissertation 'More Than Walls: Walls of Ambiguity and the Crisis of the Figure in Late 19th Century Scandinavian Interior Painting,' Department of Department of Art History, Aesthetics & Culture and Museology, Aarhus University:**

What happens if we focus on the background in a painting instead of its figures? In a way, this is a counterintuitive thing to do, because as human beings we orientate ourselves toward other human beings. What is a background? Taste the word: background. Background to what? To figures and actions that take place in front of those backgrounds. From a figure-focused point of view, a wall surface in a painting may seem secondary pictorial content, but in many late nineteenth-century interior paintings, painters begin to treat them as fields of pictorial interest—sometimes even on behalf of the figures placed in front of them. That is what this dissertation is about.

Using the wall surface as its prism, this dissertation studies how the figure in late-nineteenth-century painting gives way to pictorial elements that were traditionally regarded as secondary pictorial content. I study how this tendency is managed differently by different painters, not only by those who oriented themselves toward Symbolism, but also by those who were more turned toward Naturalism and Impressionism. Along the way, I make a trip back to Dutch genre painting from the latter half of the seventeenth century. I also make a

stop in the first half of the nineteenth century to scrutinize an interior portrait of a bourgeois family who seem to be struggling to remain the focus of their own portrait. Toward the end of the dissertation, I compare the invasive ornamentation found in interior paintings from the 1890s to the fusion between the figure and its surroundings that characterizes the works of the historical avant-garde.

Empirically, I take as my starting point Scandinavian interior paintings from the period 1880–1910 by artists including Vilhelm Hammershøi, Ejnar Nielsen, Anna Ancher, Christian Krohg, and Edvard Munch. The wall surface often plays a central role in paintings by these artists. However, it does so in varying ways and with varying perceptual effects. I have not chosen to focus on Scandinavian interior painting because there are no empty, expanding, and ambiguous wall surfaces in the works of other European artists: there are. However, as a visual phenomenon, empty, expanding, monochrome, and ambiguous wall surfaces seem to be particularly dominant in late nineteenth-century Scandinavian painting.

Because it is simply a flat surface, an empty wall surface has the potential to cause viewers to hesitate between different symbolic interpretations. Late-nineteenth-century Scandinavian painters exploited this potential in different ways. Thus, painters who were oriented toward Impressionism used the empty wall surface as a projection screen for more or less pastose depictions of the play of natural light. Painters who were more preoccupied with the malfunctions of society used it as a backdrop to elicit the viewer's empathy for the miserable figures in front of it. Others, including those who oriented themselves toward Symbolism, exploited its unique potential to appear semiotically ambiguous and uncanny.

Thus, at the peak of a century that had hailed the domestic interior as a place for bourgeois self-representation and self-identification, some Scandinavian painters put an uncanny twist on their inheritance from the Dutch paintings of bourgeois domestic interiors from the second half of the seventeenth century—the paintings in which the wall surface first became a motif of painterly interest. By picturing figures in domestic interiors that, on the one hand, appear clearly realistic (i.e., dominated by vision) but that, on the other hand, are dominated by vast, empty wall surfaces whose ambiguity is not incontestably the result of the painter's subjective or conscious mediating process, artists such as Ejnar Nielsen, Vilhelm Hammershøi, and Edvard Munch turned the domestic interior into an uncanny setting.

### About Ellen Egemose

Ellen Egemose is an art historian. She produced her PhD dissertation at the Department of Art History, Aesthetics & Culture and Museology, Aarhus University, where she has been part of the Centre for 19th Century Studies research programme. She works as a curator at Kunstmuseum Brandts.

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### Time and Place for the defence

Friday 14 October 2022 at 13:00 – 16:00  
Kasernen, building 1584, entrance B, room 224

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Cover photo: Ejnar Nielsen (1872-1956), *The Sick Girl* (detail), 1896.  
Oil on canvas. 111 x 164 cm. SMK – National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen  
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