

Albin Amerlin, Christiane

Chicago 1902 – 1975 Barrevik

oil on canvas

28 ¾ by 22 inches (73 by 56 cm)

signed lower right: 'Amelin', dated '-27' on verso

provenance: Private collection, Sweden

note: William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), the great nineteenth century French academic painter advised, "Paint as you see, and be accurate in your drawing." Bouguereau's art maintained a photo idealistic style of realism and naturalism. According to this school, the true depiction of the reality of a sitter's appearance is one of the traditional aims of portraiture, but in *Christiane* a veil of irrationality seems to lie over the sitter's features. It is as if actual appearance has been abandoned in favor of a spontaneous evocation of some invisible inward force.

Albin Amelin's approach to his subject was radical in 1927. Like other inter-war Modernist artists, he breaks with Bouguereau's tired academic conventions, confronting the viewer and unsettling his expectations and comfortable bourgeoisie visual habits. *Christiane* presents a classical nude studio pose, but the painting turns academic convention on its head. Familiar artistic traditions, along with Bouguereau's realistic draftsman's line dissolve before us. Earlier academic painters sought to conceal their painting process, directing the viewer's attention to the represented object rather than the means of that representation. Here, Amelin embraces the creative process, resulting in what becomes an inevitable confrontation with both viewer and subject.

Like numerous of his contemporaries, Amelin follows in the footsteps of Vincent van Gogh, the father of Modernism who, along with Paul Gauguin, was a major influence on the Expressionists movement before World War I. These artists placed a primacy on creative process over verisimilitude. The recording of external appearances championed by the earlier Impressionist school was opposed by the Expressionists, who responded to the imperatives of an inner world. Their art, like Amelin's just a few years later, reflects a heightened awareness of this inner world, employing a subjective means of depiction marked by energetic pose, distortion of form, and often an orgy of color, and radical paint application. In *Christiane*, Amelin builds upon this earlier Expressionist sensibility. The depiction of his model derives from the artist's own subjective experience and from the radical transition into expressive form and color arrangement which overcomes and replaces art's traditional function of representing or illustrating outer appearances.

Amelin pursues an instinctive approach to his subject, in which he conveys the experience rather than simply the look of outer form. The School of London painter David Bomberg (1890-1957) aptly advised, "Draw out the spirit of the mass." Here, *Christiane* moves towards abstraction, while still maintaining the semblance of form and spirit in the mass, capturing the essence rather than the exactness of the female figure presented before us. Amelin is not portraying an impression of form from the outside, but an expression from within. He overcomes a passive depiction of nature and taps into his own individual emotional powers by employing brash color and brushwork, discovering, then revealing, a singular brutality of form which lies beyond the surface of natural appearance. Here, artistic distortion and exaggeration render the material world transparent to the human psyche. *Christiane* is not the creation of a simple observation of nature, but comes to possess its own intrinsic nature, thru the artist's creative process. The work is

formative rather than imitative and the spiritual aspect of the natural subject is liberated from the constraints of the visible.

Albin Amelin's conception of art is the exact opposite of Bouguereau's notion of the carefully planned, smoothly painted picture. *Christiane* is painting as radical improvisation. To achieve this effect Amelin adopts vehement, textured brushstrokes, enlivening the surface of both the seated figure and the surrounding background. The structure of the female nude is almost lost in the turbulent, tortured intensity of paint and color. The pastel palette of flesh-pink, touched with red and green and marked with dark earth mixtures of brown, black and blue, vibrate, exploding into life before the viewer.

Christiane is more about the process of painting than the model depicted. The extreme method of paint application alienates, abstracts, and distorts the figure and her objective representation. The impasto takes on a life of its own, covering the picture field with violent energy. There is almost an automatic approach to painting here, where speed and overexcited nervous brushwork reflects the artist's mental state and mood. *Christiane* is anxiety visible, becoming a self-portrait of Amelin rather than a depiction of the woman seated before him. This spontaneous, agitated expression conveyed through heavy impasto, the nervous blurring of contours, the violent scratching of the palette knife spreading thick buttery lines of pigment, all attempt to plumb the depths of both the sitter's mind and body, and the mental anguish of the artist himself. Here, we are reminded of similar artistic techniques found in the near-contemporary works by Emil Nolde (1867-1956), Chaïm Soutine (1893-1943), and Georges Rouault (1871-1958).

The inter-war years were a time of immense artistic fracturing, with a variety of different styles emerging. During the period that *Christiane* was painted, Expressionism had come to be viewed by many as a style too exuberant and undisciplined for the somber mood of the post-World War I years. A new focus on classicism and craft was seen as a way out of chaos and darkness. Some of the old tenets of Bouguereau returned. Representational art, unemotional and realistic, rather than abstract, dynamic and emotional came back into favor, and a smooth 'Old Master' style of paint application came into vogue. Works by Neue Sachlichkeit painters such as Otto Dix and Christian Schad were being produced at the same moment as Amelin's *Christiane*. The artistic direction of these works could not have been more different, yet the course, almost living surface of Amelin's radical painting presages the works of such later figural artist as Frank Auerbach, Lucien Freud, and Jenny Savile.

Born in 1902, Albin Amelin grew up in Chicago, but because of his Swedish roots, he traveled as a young man to Sweden to study at the University College of Arts, Crafts & Design, which was known as Tekniska Skolan at that time. His art, however, can be classified as self-taught. Amelin's style may be loosely described as expressionist and he was influenced by such painters as Munch, Van Gogh and Kokoschka. But in contrast to these artists, Amelin's own style is brutal and violent, both in choice of subject matter and in technique. As with *Christiane*, his work is characterized by thick layers of paint and rough contours. Amelin's communist views also colored his work and his choice of subject matter, which commonly focused on workers engaged in manual tasks. However, many of his paintings are quite different, portraying nature and floral motifs, which also are frequently recurring themes. The artistic achievement of Albin Amelin was celebrated with the release of two postage stamps by the country of Sweden in 1969.

The same female sitter appears in a drawing by Amelin dated 1928 (Fig. 1) and a painting from 1926 where the model is identified as "Christiane". (Fig. 2)



Fig. 1



Fig. 2