

Axel Fridell, *Portrait of Einar Forseth*
Falun 1894 - 1935 Stockholm

oil on canvas
22 by 17 ¼ inches (56 by 44 cm)
signed and dated lower right: 'Axel Fridell/Sthlm 1914'

provenance: Stockholms Auktionsverk, Stockholm, June 5, 2013, no. 1731;
Private Collection, London

literature: Karl Haskell, *Axel Fridell*, vol. 2, Trelleborg, 1989, p. 85, ill.

note: One of Sweden's preeminent 20th-century artists Axel Fridell (figs. 1a-d) was born, the son of a furniture maker, in the provincial town of Falun, where as a boy working in the local copper mine, he started studying art in evening classes. He then began more formal training in 1909 and receiving support from other aspiring artists moved to Stockholm in 1913. There Fridell studied first at the atelier of Carl Wilhelmson, but then transferred to the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts. He was fortunate to have as a teacher Axel Tallberg (1861-1928), who inspired him to concentrate on the graphic arts. In this field, working primarily in drypoint and etching, Fridell, influenced by the examples of Rembrandt, Goya, Munch, Meryon, Whistler, and Seymour Haden, achieved his greatest fame producing many landscapes, genre scenes (fig. 2), and especially portraits, including those of the Swedish royal family (fig. 3). He was able to travel to London, Venice, and Paris in the 1920s and 30s to expand his artistic knowledge and repertoire of images, becoming ever more sophisticated in his etching technique. In several paintings of interiors done in the 1920s (figs. 4a-c), his approach is reminiscent of the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864-1916). Sadly, Fridell died from lung cancer at the early age of forty, but his achievements were recognized in Sweden with large retrospective exhibitions at the National Gallery in Stockholm in 1936-37 and again in 1987. In 1974 his most famous print was used for a Swedish postage stamp (fig. 5), and in 2003 a Fridell Society was formed to honor his work, which is well represented in Swedish museums.

In his early years while a student at the Academy of Fine Arts, Fridell in his paintings alternated between a naïve, delicate style (fig. 6) and a rather more vigorous impressionist manner depicting subjects of everyday life and landscapes (figs. 7a-d). With several of his fellow art students he increasingly spent time enjoying the city's nightlife instead of concentrating on his studies. His dissolute life-style, evident in his art and in photographs of the period (figs. 8a-f) led in 1916 to the expulsion of Fridell and his fellow Falun-born artist Beril Bull-Hedlund (fig. 9) from the Academy. Fortunately, Fridell's teacher, Tallberg, continued to mentor him, and he was becoming recognized for his talent, especially as a print maker. Much of the young artist's works in these years reflects not only his bohemian existence, but also his friendship with other artists, often depicted in bars or drinking (figs. 10a-h). One of these fellow art students was Einar Forseth (fig. 11a: 1892-1988), who was also enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts during the years 1912-15. His distinctive long face and prominent nose are seen in several of Fridell's prints and drawings of these years (figs. 11b-e), as well as two painted portraits. These are the present sketchy rendering of 1914 and a more highly finished, more formal one of the following year (fig. 12).¹ In both Fridell captures what definitely seems to be the inebriated state of his friend with the liquor or wine bottle quite prominent, as it was in so many of his artist portraits. Our more brilliant, sketchy study, with its almost haphazard, unfinished quality, showing the young man with disheveled hair

and holding a cigarette posed against an abstract background is indeed the very portrait of the romantic artist as a louche young man. This image is quite different from Forseth's own more sober *Self-Portrait* of 1917-18 (fig. 13), and he went on to have a distinguished career as a decorative artist working in stained glass, mosaics, and textiles, with his most famous creation being the mosaics of 1921-23 in the Golden Hall of Stockholm's City Hall (fig. 14a) where the annual Nobel Prize Awards banquet is now held (fig. 14b). Fridell and Forseth remained in contact,² as is evidenced by several portraits of Fridell by Forseth from the late 1920s and into the 1930s (figs. 15a-c). Clearly both artists had outgrown their wayward, youthful years, captured so spontaneously in this splendid study.

¹ Private collection, sold at Stockholms Auktionsverk, Stockholm, June 3, 2010, no. 1980.

² See Haskell, 1989, vol. 2, pp.462, 464, 479.and 487.