

Anders Zorn: Painter of Earth and Light

by Gail Leggio

He was one of the most successful portrait painters of the Gilded Age, a bravura paint-handler and a dazzling watercolorist, but this career-savvy cosmopolitan's posthumous reputation suffered because he was seen as too establishment. While that summary biography might suggest John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), the description also fits Anders Zorn (1860–1920). Zorn, a terrific artist with a distinctive style, has a higher profile with museumgoers these days, thanks to the 2013 exhibition “Anders Zorn: A European Artist Seduces America,” at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston,¹ and a recent, more wide-ranging retrospective, “Anders Zorn: Sweden's Master Painter,” organized by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and the Zornmuseet in association with the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm. The works—oil paintings, watercolors and etchings—in the beautifully produced catalogue (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and Skira Rizzoli) showcase Zorn's energy and skill.

Born in Mora, Sweden, Zorn never saw his father and grew up on his mother's family farm. Rural life and folk culture remained part of his imaginative world. (In contrast, Sargent, born in Florence to expatriate American parents, was comparatively rootless, part of the tribe of well-heeled transatlantic gypsies who make up Henry James's *dramatis personae*.) Still, Zorn was ambitious and, after study at the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm, began acquiring an international identity. He honeymooned with his bride, Emma Lamm, in Constantinople, and traveled in Spain, North Africa and England.

His works reflect his peripatetic lifestyle. His portrait of the daughter of the Spanish king's secretary, *Cristina Morphy* (1884), painted in Madrid, is remarkably assured. The relatively tight handling of the girl's strongly lit features harmonizes with the loose texture of her blond hair and ruffled sleeve. The blurred rendering of the tapestry backdrop adds to the richness. This sumptuous portrait, like most of Zorn's early work, is executed in watercolor. Connoisseurs of the medium can only rejoice at the examples in the Zorn exhibition, on the heels of the blockbuster “John Singer Sargent Watercolors.”² Zorn uses watercolor in a variety of ways, from formal to sketchy. *River under Old Stone Bridge* (1884) builds on Courbet-like elements—rock, water, foliage—for a mysterious scene of dark mossy shadows and silvery glints of light on the stream. Zorn saturates the paper to create deep almost-abstract areas of lush green. *The Thorn Brush* (1886), a scene of a young woman in the sun-dappled woods, depends on a drier technique, with flickering brushwork delineating the tangled foliage.



From Algiers Harbor, 1887

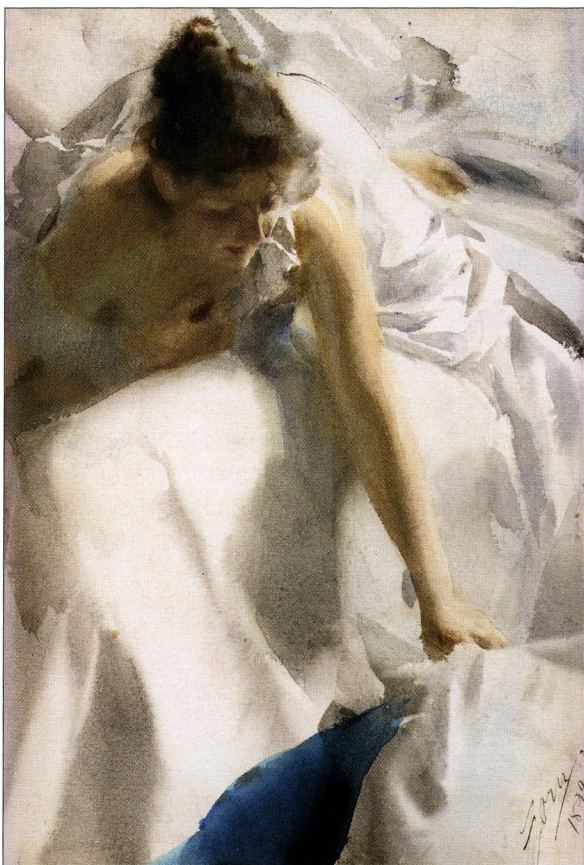
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Zorn responded to the strong North African sunlight, especially in its effects on white, as in *Man and Boy in Algiers* (1887), but he has an unusual aptitude for a grey palette. *From Algiers Harbor* (1887) demonstrates his genius with monochrome. Two women, veiled in white, perch on matte-grey steps in the foreground, as the viewer seems to hover over the pewter-and-pearl ripples of the water. A boatman, slightly behind them and to the right, draws the eye toward the expansive, shimmering harbor and beyond, to the boats and the city rising on the far shore, in hazy sunlight. Zorn could get an extraordinary number of effects from his range of greys. He was drawn to a plump fisherman's wife on the English coast and showed her "dragging around a couple of six-foot fish on the beach where the catch was auctioned off,"³ for *Fish Market in Saint Ives* (1888). *From Algiers Harbor* has an opalescent exoticism. Yet with

more-or-less the same palette, Zorn conjures up the chilly roughness of St. Ives. The men working in the surf could come from a snapshot. Huge fish gape, their white underbellies distinguishing them from the muddy grey sand. The raw redness of the woman's arms testifies to the weather's harshness. However far afield he roamed, Zorn frequently returned to Sweden, a perennial source of his strength and aesthetic vision. His *Summer Vacation* (1886) is a souvenir of Dalarö, an island in the Stockholm archipelago. Emma, dressed all in white, watches from a jetty as a man grasps the oars of a rowboat. The rocking movement of the water is palpable, and undulating ripples, painted in tones from silver-white to near-black, stretch back to the horizon, where they blend into the pearly haze of the sky.

A number of nineteenth-century painters explored a particular kind of restricted palette in what are called "white pictures." The prototype may be Dante Gabriel Rossetti's annunciation picture, *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (1849), and the most famous example is probably James Abbott McNeill Whistler's *Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl* (1862), although Sargent's *Fumée d'Ambre Gris* (1880) is justifiably renowned. Rossetti adds a psychological dimension to Christian iconography, Whistler presents a bohemian portrait of his mistress, Sargent conjures up an exotic Aesthetic fantasy—all focusing on the color white, with its range of associations and painterly shades and textures. Zorn often features white, in the garments of his North African figures, for instance, but two of his watercolors can be classified more formally as white pictures. Both depict a woman in an interior. *The Bride* (1886) focuses on a demure figure in a traditional wedding gown, standing in a room filled with diffused light. The white chairs are ghostly shapes in the greyish shadows, and the bride's profile is sharply etched against the luminous void of the window. The mood is very different in *Reveil, boulevard Clichy* (1892). A young woman has just woken up in bed and, bare-shouldered, reaches for a garment to cover herself. The bedclothes, rumpled and dazzling white in the sunlight, fill the frame. It is a radiantly hedonistic vignette, with the girl's incandescence liberated by the color white and animated by bravura brushwork.

Reveil, boulevard Clichy is a worldly picture. Zorn realized that he needed to establish a presence on the international art scene, in London, Paris and the United States. The Swedish artist Carl Larsson was impressed with his friend's adaptability in Paris: "Zorn was at home here, as he was everywhere, just like fish in water."⁴ At the Exposition Universelle of 1889, Zorn won a first-class medal and, at the age of twenty-nine, the Légion d'Honneur. A canny entrepreneur who understood the art marketplace, Zorn turned to the more profitable medium of oil, which he used with aggressive panache. The contemporary critic Paul Leprieux called him a "slick, speedy and succinct genius."⁵ The restless energy of his paint-handling could seem improvisational, but the artist Axel Reinhold Lindholm described Zorn's purposeful technique: "Each brushstroke was precisely calculated before being executed. First the hand described



Reveil, boulevard Clichy, 1892

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the necessary motion in the air, and then the stroke was performed with style and confidence.... Zorn never painted anything, not the least thing, haphazardly.”⁶

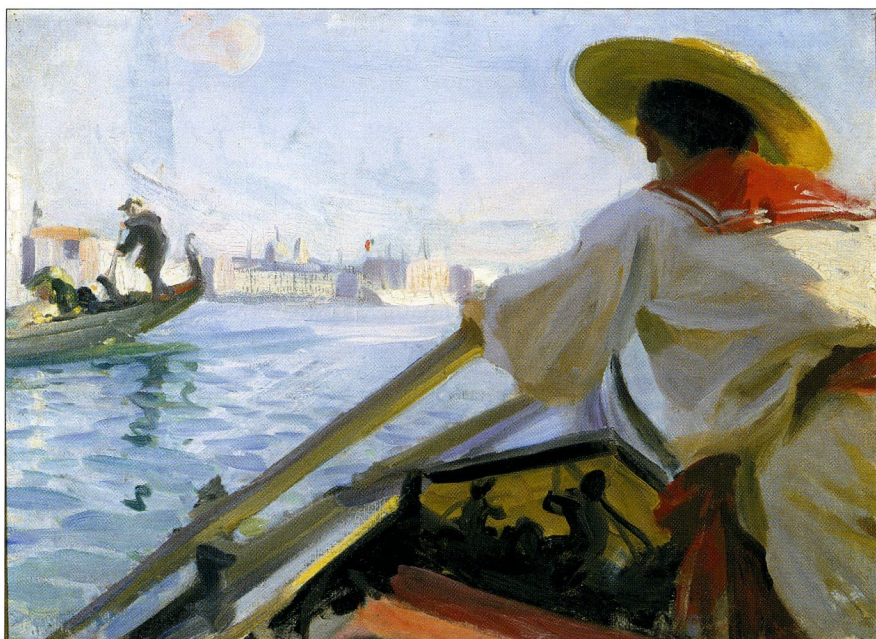
Zorn displays his confidence convincingly in *The Omnibus*, set within the confines of a Parisian streetcar. There are two versions of the quintessentially urban scene, the one in this exhibition (1895, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm) and the one (1892) purchased by the collector Isabella Stewart Gardner at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Her instincts were good, and her taste was adventurous. The passengers are a mixed lot: an attractive young woman with a hatbox on her lap, another woman with a feathery scarf, a dozing workman in his cap, a top-hatted gentleman with a mustache. They are arrayed on one side of the car, caught in the irregular light from a smudgy window. A study for *Omnibus* (1891–92), also in the exhibition, shows how Zorn used expressive, bold gestures with paint to capture the herky-jerky movement and ever-shifting chiaroscuro of the omnibus. Zorn brought *The Omnibus*, along with a selection of his other paintings, to Chicago in his capacity as commis-

sioner for the Swedish exhibition. It was his first trip to the United States, and he stayed for nearly a year.

Zorn made seven trips to the United States and thrived as a portraitist, securing commissions to paint three presidents, Grover Cleveland, Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft, but his best portraits emerge from the stylish precincts of high society, especially from Isabella Stewart Gardner's circle. She became his principal American patron and a true friend, inviting the painter and his wife to stay with her in Venice. In *Isabella Stewart Gardner in Venice* (1894), Zorn depicts his hostess, in a white gown with a long string of pearls, spreading her arms wide to welcome her guests in the Palazzo Barbaro. The fireworks display behind her, over the Grand Canal, is indicated with exuberant smears of white paint. The central figure seems to vibrate, to dance like a flame. Zorn said he wanted to capture "just her character, more magnificently princely than most and with a charm in her voice that enslaves the rest of us."⁷⁷ The same year, Zorn painted the exuberant *In My Gondola*. Most of the right side of the picture is filled with a back view of the gondolier, his broad-brimmed hat set at a rakish angle. On the left, over the water, buildings are sketched in hazy sunlight on the other side of the canal. The off-kilter composition creates a feeling of unsteady yet exhilarating movement, and Zorn's paint-handling is spontaneous.

By this point in his career, Zorn had established himself as a major portraitist, with a knack for conveying high style with an appealing sense of informality. *Martha Dana* (1899) depicts one of Gardner's protégés, an attractive young woman in a crisp modern ensemble of white blouse and tailored black jacket, set off by a jaunty little hat. Zorn shows her half-length, against a white wall and shadowed alcove, and focuses our attention on her face, which radiates confidence and lively intelligence. His portrait *Elizabeth Sherman Cameron* (1900), painted in Paris, suggests a far more sophisticated milieu. Elizabeth, an intimate friend of Henry Adams, sits on a salmon-colored settee, one arm outstretched while she toys with a fan. The backdrop is a Japanese screen in gold, and her white satin dress is dotted with roses. Zorn lights her from the front and slightly below, casting shadows that outline her head and shoulders, giving her a seductive look. In the catalogue, Hans Heinrich Brummer aptly remarks: "Here Zorn the sensualist and observer...mustered his tactile feeling for skin and fabrics as well as his understanding of the individual who sustained this façade."⁷⁸ This picture demonstrates that Zorn was competing against Sargent at a very high level of execution.

In at least one case, the two painters depicted the same subject. Zorn's *Mrs. Walter Rathbone Bacon* (1897) was commissioned by the lady's brother-in-law, a railroad magnate and canny connoisseur. In 1896, Sargent had shown her standing against a wall mural, in a Spanish-style dress with a fan. In Zorn's portrait, she sits regally in a chair, wearing a gleaming satin-and-lace white dress. But any sense of formality is undercut by her companion, a beautiful collie



In My Gondola, 1894

COURTESY OF THE ZORN COLLECTIONS MUSEUM, MORA, SWEDEN

that she leans over to caress, creating a lively diagonal shape. Zorn's high-angle point of view and loose brushwork add to the energy of the composition.

Zorn's manipulation of angles make for some dramatic compositions. In his oil painting *Self-Portrait with Model* (1896), the artist occupies the left foreground, a hulking figure in his white smock, which absorbs most of the light in the room. Even his palette seems to fade into the shadows. The model, wrapped in dark drapery that obscures part of her face but with her bare legs gleaming, sits in the background, a mysterious figure in the upper right corner of the frame. The use of chiaroscuro is stunning. The exhibition also includes Zorn's etching of the subject, *Self-Portrait with Model II* (1899), in which he achieves similar effects not with slashes of paint but with welters of lines. The contemporary critic Roger Marx noted Zorn's "miraculous skill in obtaining a contourless image by the narrowing or spreading of diagonal hatching."⁹ Leprieur praised the way Zorn, "with long parallel strokes, enfolds the form and light, as in a net or meshwork that comes together or splits apart, to model and render the suppleness of flesh and even the palpitations of life."¹⁰

Zorn was a marvelous etcher, a star of the nineteenth-century etching revival and both an admirer and a collector of Rembrandt's graphic work. James A. Ganz, in an excellent catalogue essay, remarks: "Many of the qualities associated with Zorn's etching style, such as his improvisational crosshatching and selective finish, were precisely the aspects of Rembrandt's etching that appealed to the artistic vanguard of the 1860s."¹¹ *Zorn and His Wife* (1890) was based on a

1636 Rembrandt self-portrait with Saskia. Zorn builds up dense areas of shadow with his slashing lines, which make the highlights even more striking. The influence of Rembrandt is clear, but Zorn pushes the dynamic of bare and heavily worked in a modernist direction. In *Ernest Renan* (1892), he uses emphatic diagonal lines to form the bulky figure on the right, while minimally outlining the mantelpiece, with its clock, and desk strewn with papers. It is a brilliant exploration of positive and negative space. In *An Irish Girl, or Annie* (1894), the model's features emerge indistinctly from the stygian gloom, but she has real physical presence, especially because she is backlit against a window covered with a transparent curtain. Zorn suggests the pattern in the curtain, her disheveled halo of hair and her ruffled collar with a few calligraphic strokes.

Zorn's images—oils, watercolors, etchings—have a restless immediacy rooted in what Anne Hollander, in her book *Moving Pictures*, calls “the dialectic of light and dark.”¹² While Hollander does not specifically mention Zorn, she locates a proto-cinematic aesthetic in Northern European art, which encompasses both the tradition he inherited and his innovative practice. That aesthetic depends upon “the casual fall of light on phenomena and the apparently artless dip into the flow of passing experience, rather than the visibly composed, controlled rendering of groups in significant poses,” and upon “dramatic and unstable angles from which to see things.”¹³ Zorn's chiaroscuro and the technique of “revelation through light, the constant agent of possibility”¹⁴ foster a sense of spontaneity that feels both thoroughly secular and touched by an unpredictable grace.

Zorn was a realist, uninterested in history painting or myth and religion as subject matter. While he espoused no particular doctrine, his practice was in line with Gustave Courbet's 1861 pronouncement that “an object which is abstract, non-visible, non-existent, is not within the realm of painting.”¹⁵ In the mid-nineteenth century, most painters were still positioning themselves in relation to art history, not only within the Academy but also in the avant-garde. Édouard Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863) is based on a Renaissance composition, Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving after Raphael's *Judgment of Paris*. Manet's rough paint-handling shocked many viewers, but so did the friction between iconographic tradition and the everyday figures in contemporary dress—and undress. Manet's *Olympia*, like the woman in *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, shocks because she is a naked modern woman, rather than a nude in the classical tradition. Yet Manet stages *Olympia* in open cognizance of old masters such as Titian, although he flattens out the shapes to emphasize the picture plane.

Zorn's nudes are, in contrast, startlingly naturalistic. There are no allusions—or challenges—to old master compositional tropes. The body types he favors are sensuous and attractive, neither idealized nor provocative. Manet uses the model in *Olympia*, on the other hand, to make points about frank sexuality and abstraction in painting: he is a conceptual painter as well as a shrewd paint-handler. Other modernists, such as Paul Cézanne and Henri



River under Old Stone Bridge, 1884

COURTESY OF THE ZORN COLLECTIONS MUSEUM, MORA, SWEDEN

Matisse, also seem aware of the legacy of traditional genres, such as bathers, when they paint the nude. Zorn approaches the nude from a different perspective, using plein-air settings and emphasizing the physical. In the exhibition catalogue, Johan Cederlund remarks that, while Zorn had some affinities with the Impressionists, he “never completely revoked the figures’ corporeality.”¹⁶ Zorn’s models have weight and move naturally. Their skin reflects the play of light and, seemingly, the temperature of the air and water in their specific environment, the islands of the Stockholm archipelago.

In *Frileuse (Shivering Girl)*, from 1894, the model’s fair skin turns rosy in the chill air as she wades into the water, generating concentric ripples around her. In *Summer Evening* (1894), the model hesitates on the rocks, looking out over the placid surface of the water, gleaming in the lingering Nordic light. In *Une première* (1888), a woman guides a young boy as he awkwardly splashes in the shallows, in a vignette that suggests the human feeling and the vigorous brushwork of one of Zorn’s closest friends, the Spanish painter Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida. Zorn creates balanced compositions yet fosters the illusion that we are happening on these scenes by chance. In a moment, the figures will move, the sunlight will brighten or fade, the angle of vision will change as we move closer or turn away. The artist’s quick responses to such accidents engender a feeling of fluidity within the frame.

Zorn was a sophisticated, modern and international artist; he was also a champion of his native culture. The two facets of his life come together in *Midsummer Dance* (1894), which records the principal folk celebration at Dalarno, a picturesque area of Sweden that epitomized rural romanticism.

Zorn collected Swedish handicrafts and established an open-air museum to preserve traditional architecture. His Gammelgard, which continued to grow after his death in 1920, now comprises forty buildings, many of them medieval. The Zornmuseet, next to his home in Mora, which opened in 1939, was designed by Ragnar Östberg, a noted Arts and Crafts architect.¹⁷ *Midsummer Dance* celebrates a time and space that seem both primordial and ephemeral, an ancient ritual of human coupling and the yearly blessing of long days in the sun. The handsome, simple wooden buildings and peasant costumes convince us of their authenticity, but Zorn avoids ethnography and the faux-primitive. This is a Swedish picture, but the artist has studied other examples of rural realism, by the Frenchman Jules Bastien-Lepage, for example. The dance is ancient, but Zorn finds exciting immediacy in the present moment—through the dancing figures built up from slashes and daubs of paint, through the flicker of light on simple faces. *Midsummer Dance* is not static: it is, in full acknowledgment of Hollander's book, a moving picture. It reminds me of the harvest scenes in John Schlesinger's 1967 film adaptation of Thomas Hardy's novel *Far from the Madding Crowd*, of the way cinematographer Nicolas Roeg frames the extras to give us a new, palpable understanding of country life. The world Zorn opens to us is as solid as earth and as transitory—and transfiguring—as light. "Anders Zorn: Sweden's Master Painter" was on view February 17–May 18, 2014, at the National Academy Museum, 1083 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10128. Telephone (212) 369-4880. nationalacademy.org

NOTES

1. Oliver Tostmann, et al., *Anders Zorn: A European Artist Seduces America* (London: Paul Holberton, 2013).
2. Erica E. Hirshler and Teresa A. Carbone, et al., *John Singer Sargent Watercolors* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts and Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 2013).
3. Johan Cederlund, "Anders Zorn: A Swedish Painter in the World," *Anders Zorn: Sweden's Master Painter* (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and Skira Rizzoli Publications, 2013), p. 16.
4. Ibid.
5. James A. Ganz, "Etching in the City of Light," *Anders Zorn: Sweden's Master Painter*, p. 83.
6. Cederlund, p. 17.
7. Hans Henrik Brummer, "Anders Zorn in America," *Anders Zorn: Sweden's Master Painter*, p. 39.
8. Ibid.
9. Ganz, p. 83.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Anne Hollander, *Moving Pictures* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), p. 20.
13. Ibid., p. 443.
14. Ibid., p. 28.
15. Linda Nochlin, ed., *Realism and Tradition in Art 1848–1900: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 35.
16. Cederlund, p. 17.
17. Denise Hagströmer, "Sweden," Karen Livingston and Linda Parry, eds., *International Arts and Crafts* (London: V & A Publications, 2005), pp. 276–85. See also Per Hedström, "Anders Zorn in a Nordic Context," *Anders Zorn: Sweden's Master Painter*.