

Cultural Daily

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INTERIORS: On Strandgade, Copenhagen

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, January 24th, 2018

Context:

Toward the end of his life, the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi resided in the harbor area of Copenhagen, at number 30, then at 25 Strandgade, where he died in the building complex of the Asian Company he had painted in 1902. See feature image, showing a moored sailing merchant ship between twin buildings, under the clouded nordic light, painted in a subdued color palette I have tried to render in my pen and brown ink sketches.



Asian Company Buildings – 1902

The French writer Philippe Delerm, known for his ability to render the experience of ephemeral situations, scenes and places, published in 2001 a little book on interiors painted by Hammershøi that he described and commented in his very evocative prose. See bibliographic note.

In the dead of winter, and in a sketching-the-masters impulse, I sketched a few of these paintings included in Delerm's book, seeing in their chronological order something of the *process of exploration and appropriation* of a dwelling place, a process I could identify with and comment with my own accompanying notes.

Chronology:

In 1900, having moved in the building at 30 Strandgade, Hammershøi chose to paint sun rays penetrating the dwelling, next to what appears to be the entry door to the flat, as if to gauge the quality of light he would paint by.

I see also, in this painting, the expression of a fundamental experience upon taking possession of a space, which is the need to *explore the interior space in its relationship to the exterior* ... a door next to a window through which streams sun-rays embodies that experience. See image below.



Sun Rays – (30 Strandgade) 1900

In 1904 Hammershøi will paint his dining room, seen through a door opening, appointed with an upholstered seats and a couch that is part of the seating around the table, and with a typical striated pattern carpet on the floor, touched by a transversal ray of light coming from a hidden window. A

lone framed set of images together with the tablecloth speak of decorative gestures of appropriation. See image below.



Interior (30 Strandgade) 1904

In 1905 the painter introduced a person whose posture speaks of having stopped to look back before moving on. It is uncannily set at the crossing of a corridor opened to three doorways, one of which has just been crossed by the person as she heads toward another doorway.

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Four doorways in such short distance gives it a central circulation role, where things may indeed happen as people cross the dark interior corridor to reach day-lit spaces ... an interesting place for the occupants to experience in the first stages of occupation of the dwelling.



Interior with standing woman (30 Strandgade) ca. 1905

In 1908 the person in the painting is seated and busy at some activity, next to a side table, facing a dark corridor in front of her, with the light coming into the room from a window located outside the painting frame.

The painting speaks of a consciously chosen situation issued from a longer acquaintance with the use and appropriation of the dwelling spaces.



Interior with woman dressed in black and seated on ochre coloured seat (30 Strandgade) 1908

In 1914, old age and the onset of a terminal illness had kept the painter at his last home, at 25 Strandgade, the interior of which he painted as a *spatial enfilades of rooms ... most likely the defining spatial feature of the newly occupied dwelling*. See image below titled “The four rooms at 25 Strandgade” dated 1914, two years before he died.



Interior said of the four rooms (25 Strandgade) 1914

A personal note:

I led, in the mid eighties, a study tour of environmental design students, in Denmark and Sweden; I also spent, in 1990, a good part of a research sabbatical based in Lund, Sweden, with visits to Copenhagen.

The interest these two countries have shown for responding to the housing needs of their people, be it their willingness to experiment various tenures, densities and urban planning principles, was at the heart of my Scandinavian study tour and research stints.

To understand the nature of that interest please consider the name given to the 1985 Danish Housing exhibition project, near Odense, we visited during our study tour: **BYG OG BO, i.e. Build and Live-reside-dwell.**

Hammershøi's paintings of interiors, in their sensitive and discerning exploration of light and residential occupation subtleties, could be considered an early and notable expression of that interest.

Philippe Delerm certainly understood and felt it.

Bibliographic note:

Delerm, P. *Intérieur – Vilhelm Hammershøi, Les Flohic*, ed. 2001

Feature image scanned from Delerm's book, pp.10-11

Credit sketch renderings of Hammershøi's paintings, Maurice Amiel

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