Académie Matisse and its Relevance
in the Life and Work of Sigrid Hjertén

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The 1890s saw an immense transformation in the professional status of artists as they increasingly rejected state academies – and in doing so, ‘traditional’ training routes – in favour of the studios of progressive and established mentors. Women artists were no exception; despite being permitted to train in Stockholm (from 1864) and Copenhagen (from 1888) they began to prefer the cosmopolitan and liberating ambience of private studio tuition in Paris, Munich and Düsseldorf (Lindberg 1998, Christensen 1998, Ingelman 1984). Travel offered both a release from the strictures of bourgeois society and an opportunity to experience foreign avant-garde subcultures and metropolitan life. In Paris, Académie Julian, founded in 1868, was the first to offer women a course comparable to that of the officially-recognised École des Beaux-Arts, which did not accept women until 1897 (Weisberg, Becker 1999: 15-67, Kropmanns, Schäfer 2004: 25-39). However, Académie Julian charged female students much higher fees than their male colleagues and, after an initial trial of mixed classes, male and female students were separated. The posthumous publication of the diary of the gifted Ukrainian artist and feminist Marie Bashkirtseff, who began her studies at Académie Julian in 1877 and died tragically in 1884, offered a precedent for many aspiring women artists (Theuriet 1887). Apart from the expensive Académie Julian, Académie Colarossi was the most well-known, especially for its nude life-drawing and its emphasis on the challenging croquis – short, spontaneous sketches of models, who changed their poses every half hour (M [Mendelssohn], H[enriette] 1897).

Following the scandal of the so-called ‘Fauve’ exhibition at the
Salon d’Automne of 1905, Matisse was encouraged to establish an art school. Although it lasted for only three years – from 1908 until 1911 – Académie Matisse, as it was known, attracted over 120 male and female pupils, many of whom went on to become important artists in their own right. The student cohort was international from the outset, including a number of gifted Germans and Americans: Marg Moll and her husband, Oskar Moll; the young Hans Purrmann; and the Americans Sarah Stein (wife of Michael Stein and sister-in-law of the well-known collectors Leo and Gertrude Stein), Max Weber and Henri Patrick Bruce. Apparently alerted by Birger Simonsson (1882-1938), who visited Paris in 1906 at the height of Matisse’s notoriety, the Swede Carl Palme (1879-1960) was also instrumental in the founding of the school. Furthermore, during the period 1909-1910, around half of the pupils (some 40 in total) were of Scandinavian origin (Lalander 1989: 63, Aagesen 2008: 6-17).

And whilst outnumbered by men, women were a significant presence in the mixed classes, thereby increasing their chances of being acknowledged within the modernist milieu and included in dealership networks. However, contemporary expectations of ‘femininity’ – publicly voiced by means of a predominantly dismissive critical reception – challenged these women artists’ aspirations of independence and contributed to the ambivalence of their relationship with society.

From their inception, critical discourses on modernism were explicitly gendered, implicitly acknowledging the paradigmatic superiority of the male artist. Although absent from, and unacknowledged in, its narrative, modernism’s ‘Other’ was a volatile presence that embraced the implications of modernity together with the conflicting challenges of pre-emancipation womanhood. How did women artists negotiate their precarious existence within the structures of early avant-garde culture? While the term avant-garde implies a commitment to progressive modern cultural identities, its terms have been inscribed through a primarily male canon of artwork. Furthermore, many accounts, such as Peter Bürger’s chronological and semantic distinction between aestheticist-orientated avant-gardes and those which altered the praxis and institutions of art, exclude considerations of gendered identity (Bürger 1984). Feminist literary historian Susan Suleiman has described the historical status of the female practitioner as one of ‘double marginality’, viewed by patriarchal so-