

# J.F. Willumsen

**1863** September 7, Jens Ferdinand Willumsen is born in Copenhagen. His parents are Hans Willumsen (Danish), a publican and later haberdasher, and Ane Kirstine Jensdatter (Danish).

**Education** 1877 – 78 Pupil at Thorsøe Commercial Academy in Copenhagen. 1878 – 79 Pupil at carpenters' workshop in Copenhagen. 1879 – 82 Pupil at the Technical School in Copenhagen. 1881 – 85 Pupil at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. 1882 – 85 Pupil at the Artists' Studio School in Copenhagen.

**1880s** The 1880s are J. F. Willumsen's apprentice years. During these years he qualifies as a builder at the Technical School, before studying under Laurits Tuxen and P. S. Krøyer at the Artists' Studio School. Willumsen also studies at the Royal Academy of fine Arts.

In 1885 Willumsen leaves the Academy after three unsuccessful attempts to pass the final examination.

Willumsen sees *The French Art Exhibition* in Copenhagen, 1888, which includes work by Puvis de Chavannes, Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley, and others.

1889, Willumsen submits his largest and most important work to date, *The Wedding of the King's Son* for inclusion in the Charlottenborg Spring Exhibition. The exhibition committee rejects the painting.

In 1888 – 89 Willumsen makes his first trips abroad to Paris and Spain. Here he becomes acquainted with contemporary French and

Spanish artists and sees works by Velázquez and El Greco for the first time.

## Selected Exhibitions

- 1883: *The 1883 Charlottenborg Art Exhibition*, The Charlottenborg Exhibition Building of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen.
- 1884: *The 1884 Charlottenborg Art Exhibition*, Copenhagen.
- 1885: *The 1885 Charlottenborg Art Exhibition*, Copenhagen.
- 1886: *The 1886 Charlottenborg Art Exhibition*, Copenhagen.
- 1887: *The 1887 Charlottenborg Art Exhibition*, Copenhagen.
- 1889: *The 1889 Charlottenborg Art Exhibition*, Copenhagen.
- 1889: Kleis's Kunsthandel (Art Gallery), Copenhagen. Willumsen is given his first solo exhibition. The works include *The Wedding of the King's Son* (1888 – 1949), which comes in for some harsh criticism.
- 1889: Exposition Universelle de 1889, Paris.

**1890s** In 1890 Willumsen marries the sculptor Juliette Meyer. In the summer he travels to Pont-Aven in Brittany, where he meets the French painter, Paul Gauguin. In 1890 Willumsen and Juliette settle in Paris, and their first son, Jan, is born in 1891.

In 1891, together with his colleagues, Vilhelm Hammershøi, Johan Rohde, Harold and Agnes Slott-Møller, and Malthe Engelsted, Willumsen founds Den Frie Udstilling (The Free Exhibition). This association of artists is formed in protest against the censorship imposed by the official Charlottenborg exhibitions. The first

exhibition is held in Kleis's Kunsthandel in Spring 1891. In 1893, the group rent a building at City Hall Square in Copenhagen, but in 1898 The Free Exhibition opens in a new building, designed by Willumsen, located in Aborreparken and, from 1913 onwards, at Østerport Station. The Free Exhibition is inspired by the French Salon des Refusés, showing young and progressive artists. At the first exhibition Willumsen's contribution is the etching, *Fertility*, which arouses indignation among the Danish public.

Willumsen travels to Chicago to see the World Fair, 1893. In America he buys his first camera, which is to become an important tool for him. Photographs become an aid in his work on paintings and sculptures and a tool for the reproduction of humans and their surroundings.

Willumsen and Juliette move back to Copenhagen, where in 1895 they build a studio villa with large, ceramic furnaces on Hellerupvej. Willumsen's father-in-law funds the building. In 1895 their second son, Bode, is born.

From 1897 – 1900 Willumsen is appointed artistic director of the Bing & Grøndahl porcelain factory. He goes on to bring the company great success at the 1900 World Exhibition in Paris.

### **Selected Exhibitions**

- 1890: *Exposition Nationale des Beaux-Arts*, Champ-de-Mars, Paris.
- 1891: Den Frie Udstilling, Copenhagen.
- 1891: Salon des Indépendants, Paris.
- 1892: *Willumsen Udstilling*, K. Abels Kunsthandel, Copenhagen.
- 1893: Charles Hérissé, Paris.

- 1893: Salon des Indépendants, Paris.
- 1895: *The Glasgow School, Artists of Denmark and some others*, The Art Institute of Chicago.
- 1896: *Udstilling af Arbejder*, Kunstneres Studieskole, Copenhagen.
- 1897: *Kunstaustellung 1897*, Kaiser Wilhelm Museum, Krefeld.

**1900s** In the summer of 1900 Willumsen travels to New York where he stays for almost a year. He also travels around the Alps, the Pyrenees, and Italy at regular intervals. In 1902 he travels to Amalfi in Italy for the first time, and here he uses his camera to develop the design for the big bathing picture *Sun and Youth* (1910). During his stay in New York Willumsen begins to collect images from magazines and journals as part of his working methodology. He stores his collection of clippings in 14 folders, divided into various topics such as "Men," "Women," "Land and Water." Where relevant to the context, Willumsen includes his own photographs among the clips. In 1905 Willumsen has plans to establish a Salon des Étrangers in Paris, but the plans never come to anything. The marriage between Juliette and Willumsen is dissolved in 1902. He goes on to marry the sculptor, Edith Wessel, whom he meets in connection with his work at Bing & Grøndahl. The couple live in Paris from 1903 – 05, before moving to Copenhagen, where Willumsen constructs yet another studio villa on Strandagervej in Hellerup in 1906. Willumsen himself designs the villa, which will serve as a residence and studio for the artist couple and as an exhibition venue, where they can display their works to the public. In 1906 Edith gives birth to their first daughter, Cersemi, followed in 1909 by their second daughter, Anse.

### **Selected Exhibitions**

- 1900: *Exposition Collective*, Kunstindustrimuseet, Copenhagen.
- 1901: *Raadhusudstillingen af Dansk Kunst til 1890*, The City Hall, Copenhagen.
- 1903: Salon de 1903, Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, Paris.
- 1904: Salon de 1904, Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, Paris.
- 1906: Elfte Ausstellung der Berliner Secession. Ausstellungshaus AM, Berlin.
- 1906: *J. F. Willumsen Udstilling*, Kunstforeningen (The Art Society), Copenhagen.
- 1906: Blomqvists Kunsthandel, Kristiania, Norway.
- 1907: *J. F. Willumsen Udstilling*, Helsinki and Stockholm.

**1910s** In 1911 Willumsen purchases *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (1567 – 70) by El Greco (1541 – 1614) in Florence. In many ways the picture is a pivotal point in Willumsen's artistic practice. In 1912 he goes to Crete, Italy, and Spain to paint and to learn more about El Greco's painting. On the journey his acquisitions include icons and Venetian drawings and paintings for the expansion of his private art collection, Gamle Samling (Old Collection). The collection will go on to include about 2,000 works and objects. In 1919, during a stay in London, he also buys a great many drawings and other works of art, mainly by Italian artists. In this period the sale of Willumsen's own works increases markedly thanks to the dedicated efforts of Willumsen's good friend, Alice Bloch.

In 1916 Willumsen and his family move permanently to the south of France. They live

initially in Villefranche-sur-Mer, but move to Nice in 1918.

### **Selected Exhibitions**

- 1910: *Exposition Universelle et Internationale*, Brussels.
- 1910: *Studio exhibition*, Strandagervej 28, Hellerup.
- 1912: *Exhibition of Contemporary Scandinavian Art*, The American Art Galleries, New York.
- 1912: *Exhibition of work by Modern Danish Artists*, Public Art Galleries, Brighton, UK.
- 1913: *Studio Exhibition*, Strandagervej 28, Hellerup.
- 1913: Kunstnerforbundet, Kristiania, Norway.
- 1913: *Malerudstillingen 58 Vesterbrogade*. Kleis's Kunsthandel, Copenhagen.
- 1917: *Udstilling af Malerier, Akvareller, Tegninger og Skulpturer*, Dansk Kunsthandel, Copenhagen.
- 1917: *Malerier og Studier af fremragende Danske Malere*. William Olsens Kunstsalon, Copenhagen.
- 1917: *J. F. Willumsen Udstilling*, Arnbaks Kunsthandel, Copenhagen.
- 1918: *Den Frie Udstilling*, Aarhus Kunstbygning.
- 1918: *Foraarsudstilling*, Dansk Kunsthandel, Copenhagen.
- 1919: *Den Frie Udstilling*, Aarhus Foreningen Moderne Kunst.
- 1919: *Nyare Dansk Konst*, Liljevalchs Konsthall, Stockholm.

**1920s** Willumsen turns down the offer of a professorship at the Royal Danish Academy

of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. He claims that he is not sufficiently acquainted with the work of young artists. In the early 1920s Willumsen helps Finnish art historian, Hjalmar Öhman, to write the texts and create the layout for the first Willumsen biography. He starts work on establishing a museum for Gamle Samling, and in 1921 he and Edith draw up an inventory of objects, which will be housed in the future museum. In 1923, the Danish government commission *The Great Relief* immediately after a retrospective exhibition at Den Frie Udstilling, celebrating Willumsen's sixtieth birthday. Together with Edith, Willumsen works to create a propaganda bureau in Paris for Danish music, painting, and sculpture, with a view to exporting Danish culture.

In 1927 Willumsen publishes a two-volume work in French on the subject of El Greco's youth. This work makes it absolutely clear that J. F. Willumsen is not only an artist, but also an art historian and passionate collector.

The same year, Willumsen starts a lengthy correspondence with Gustav Falck, Director of the Danish National Gallery of Art. Willumsen wants to bequeath Gamle Samling and his own works to the Danish state. The state must acquire the studio villa on Strandagervej for an annual rent of 30,000 gold crowns. The villa will then act as the artist's home and as a museum. In 1929 – 30 all parties reject Willumsen's idea. In 1928 his relationship with Edith Willumsen comes to an end. Willumsen meets the young French dancer, Michelle Bourret, and spends the rest of his life with her.

### Selected Exhibitions

1923: *Willumsen Udstillingen*. Den Frie Udstilling, Copenhagen. Retrospective exhibition celebrating the occasion of Willumsen's sixtieth birthday.

1923: *J. F. Willumsen Udstilling*. Kunstnerforbundet (The Artists' Association), Copenhagen.

1923: *Nordisk Konst*, Cöteborgs Konsthall, Gothenburg.

1925: *Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, Paris.

1928: *Dansk Målerkonst*. Helsingfors Konsthall, Helsinki.

1928: The National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen. At long last *The Great Relief* (1893 – 1928) is shown to the general public. The work comes in for a great deal of criticism, which offends Willumsen. He increasingly isolates himself from the Danish art scene.

1929: *Det Danske Kunstnerstævne*, Forum, Copenhagen.

**1930s** During the 1930s, Willumsen spends a lot of time in Venice. This inspires him to paint a series of colorful motifs of the city. From 1932 – 35 Willumsen rents a studio on the Boulevard de Rochechouart in Paris, after unsuccessfully attempting to exhibit in galleries in Amsterdam, The Hague, and London.

In May 1932 Willumsen presents a retrospective exhibition at the Galerie Georges Petit in Paris. Earlier in the same year, Picasso has had a retrospective exhibition in this very gallery.

In 1935 Willumsen starts work on ideas for a museum building, which will combine the studio villa on Strandagervej with The Free Exhibition. The museum will consist of copies of the two significant buildings and be located in Copenhagen's Østre Anlæg.

In 1936, a committee is established with the responsibility of raising funds to build a J. F. Willumsen Museum. The committee consists of: the painter Erick Struckmann; the lawyer Albert V. Jørgensen; the painter and professor Axel Jørgensen; the architect Ivar Bentsen; and Willumsen himself.

### Selected Exhibitions

- 1930: *Peintures de J. F. Willumsen*, Galerie Armand Drouant, Paris. Solo exhibition of recent works.
- 1931: *J. F. Willumsen*, Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, Paris. Solo exhibition of recent works.
- 1931: *Galerie George Petit*, Paris. Solo Exhibition of recent works.
- 1932: Galerie George Petit, Paris.
- 1932: La Biennale di Venezia, Venice.
- 1934: *Tentoonstelling van Deensche Kunst*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.
- 1935: Den Frie Udstilling, Copenhagen.
- 1936: Charlottenborg, Copenhagen. Retrospective exhibition of modern Danish art.
- 1936: Aarhus Kunstbygning, Aarhus.
- 1936: La Biennale di Venezia, Venice.
- 1938: Vejle Kunstforening

**1940s** During the war in the 1940s Willumsen lives in severe poverty. He receives parcels from the Red Cross and can barely afford to purchase materials for his works. In 1942, Willumsen and Michelle Bourret settle in Cannes in the south of France. In 1943 Willumsen draws up a deed of gift, as an appendix to his will from 1939. Here he notes that the museum can now also be built in Frederikssund or Roskilde, cities with which he has a family connection. By the end of 1946 he ships his collections to Copenhagen. The countless works are stored

in an attic at Christiansborg and at the Carlsberg Breweries.

In the summer 1947 Willumsen shows his own works at The Free Exhibition to highlight his museum gift to the state. At the same time he exhibits Gamle Samling at Charlottenborg. Willumsen has personally attributed several of the works to important artists, who did not create them. These attributions are heavily criticized and give rise to a major public debate on the subject of J. F. Willumsen and the plans for a museum.

In the autumn of 1947 Willumsen signs yet another deed of gift to the state. According to Willumsen the collection is now worth more than 8 million Danish Kroner, and a further condition is that a new museum building must be erected to house the collections.

In 1949, Hartvig Frisch, Minister of Culture and Education, introduces a bill for government subsidy for the establishment of a Willumsen Museum in Copenhagen.

### Selected Exhibitions

- 1940: *Tegninger af Danske Malere og Billedhuggere fra Nutiden*, The National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen.
- 1941: *Dansk Maleri og Skulptur i Dag*, The National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen
- 1946: *Danske Akvareller. Fra Fynboerne – Willumsen til i dag*, Föreningen för Nutida Konst, Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Copenhagen.
- 1947: *J. F. Willumsen*, Aalborg Museum.
- 1947: *J. F. Willumsens Samlinger af ældre Kunst*, Charlottenborg, Copenhagen.
- 1947: *Willumsen Udstillingen*, Den Frie Udstilling, Copenhagen.

1947: *J. F. Willumsen*,  
Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo.  
1948: *Efterårsudstilling*.  
Frederikssund Kunstforening.

**1950s** The Municipality of Copenhagen vote on the Willumsen Museum and turn the proposal down. The museum is immediately offered to Frederikssund, who pass the bill on July 23, 1952.

In the bill of Hartvig Frisch from 1949 Willumsen is mentioned as the architect of the museum, Frederikssund hires the architect, Tyge Hvass, as an assistant for the ageing Willumsen, however. As early as 1953 Tyge Hvass and Frederikssund work together without paying any heed to Willumsen's requests and suggestions. However, Willumsen personally chooses the site for the museum, which the municipality acquire in 1954. In the same year Willumsen and Michelle Bourret move to Le Cannet. In 1955 Tyge Hvass presents the finished project to Willumsen, who is deeply disappointed by the museum's architectural design and overall appearance.

Inauguration of the J. F. Willumsens Museum in Frederikssund, 1957. Willumsen is too weak to make the journey to Denmark, so he must enjoy the success of his museum back in the south of France.

J. F. Willumsen dies in Cannes on April 4, 1958 at the age of 94. He never actually visits the museum, but is later buried in the park behind it.

### **Selected Exhibitions**

1950: *J. F. Willumsen*. Tegninger og Keramik. Kunstforeningen, Copenhagen. Retrospective Willumsen Exhibition.

1951: *Exposition des Artistes Danois en France*, Cercle Volney, Paris.

1953: *Vor tids Kunst i privat eje*, Foreningen af Kunstvenner, Charlottenborg, Copenhagen.

1953: *J. F. Willumsen*. Konstnärens gåva till danska staten, Skånska Konstmuseum, Lund.