

| Under the Birches. Rediscovered Painting by Albert Edelfelt

One of the best-known Finnish artists of the 19th century is Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905). Born in the small town of Porvoo, he became internationally recognized by the age of twenty-three as he made his breakthrough in Paris. Edelfelt studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp (1873–74) and then under the direction of the widely recognized French artist Jean-Léon Gérôme at the École des beaux-arts in Paris (1874–77).¹

Albert Edelfelt started his career with historical paintings, and his first masterpiece *Queen Blanca* (1877, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki) caught both professional's and public's eye at the Paris Salon in 1877. Edelfelt's career was primarily linked with Paris – the city where he would spend significant time of his life while working in his atelier and socializing with the local art scene. Edelfelt's noble background, fluency in various languages and charming demeanor helped him build an impressive network of highly influential people. He became a popular portraitist and received orders from the aristocracy and members of royal families of various countries. In the 19th century Finland was part of the Russian Empire as a Grand Duchy and some Finnish artists had ties with St Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts. So did Edelfelt, who took part at the academy's exhibitions and was named an academician in 1881 followed by a full membership in 1895.² Therefore St Petersburg's Academy and the city's art scene became familiar to Edelfelt and would play a role in his artist's career.

In 1881 Edelfelt was introduced to the Grand Duke Wladimir Alexandrovich, brother of the emperor Alexander III and president of the Academy of Fine Arts in St Petersburg.³ As a newly appointed academician, Edelfelt had some of his art works on display at the academy and the Grand Duke was particularly charmed by one of them. It was a small painting *Dear Friends I (Berta and Capi)* with an endearing scene of a girl reading in a room filled with sunlight, and her little white dog sitting next to her.⁴ Edelfelt had used his young sister Berta

¹ Recent exhibition on Albert Edelfelt see *Albert Edelfelt*, Anne-Maria Pennoen, Hanne Selkokari, eds, exh. cat., Petit Palais, Paris, 2022, Gothenburg Museum of Art 2022, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki, 2023 (Helsinki, 2023).

² Rainer Knapas, Maria Vainio, *Albert Edelfelt och Ryssland. Brev från åren 1875–1905* (Stockholm, 2004), p. 373.

³ On Edelfelt's work for the Imperial family see Rainer Knapas, *Works by Edelfelt at the Russian Imperial Palaces* in *Albert Edelfelt*, op. cit., pp. 203–11.

⁴ A second version of the painting: *Dear Friends II (Berta and Capi)*, 1882 is held in collection of the Gothenburg Museum of Art.

as a model. The Grand Duke commissioned two paintings from the Finnish artist – a double portrait of his sons Grand Dukes Boris and Kirill and a portrait of his youngest son Andrey (1881, Gösta Serlachius Fine Arts Foundation, Serlachius Museum, Mänttä). The first mentioned portrait was considered lost for decades until rediscovered by the author of this article in 2017. It then became known that the painting had been nationalized after the revolution of 1917 and moved from Grand Duke Wladimir's palace to be submitted to the collection of the Rybińsk museum in 1921.⁵

Grand Duke Wladimir, pleased with the portraits, introduced Albert Edelfelt to the Empress Maria Feodorovna. She acquired the painting *Dear Friends I (Berta and Capi)* and commissioned a portrait of her children – Grand Duchess Xenia and Grand Duke Michael (1882, private collection). This marked the beginning of Edelfelt's career as an artist within the Russian Imperial court: in the course of over a decade Emperor Alexander III and Empress Maria Feodorovna commissioned and acquired several art works from Albert Edelfelt. These were mostly genre paintings like *In the Nursery* (1885, The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg), *From the Port of Copenhagen I–III* (1890, the versions I and II are in private collections; version III, Office of the President of the Republic / Imperial Art Collection), *Boys Playing on the Shore I* (1884, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki) and *Under the Birches* (1882) (**fig. 1**), the painting whose whereabouts remained unknown for decades until it resurfaced in Poland in 2018. There is often a veil of mystery surrounding missing paintings and in this case remnants remain to be shed even after thorough research of its provenance.

Until now, the most detailed information about *Under the Birches* could be found in the monography dedicated to Albert Edelfelt by the Finnish art historian Bertel Hintze (1901–69). Attached to his publication is a catalogue raisonné that imparts depiction, information on reproductions and sketches, mentions in publications as well as details about the provenance. Hintze describes the painting in the following way: “Inside a birch forest. Artist's 16-year-old sister Annie is depicted sitting in the forefront at the right-hand side wearing a white dress and reading to her younger sister Berta who is laying on her back in the grass on the left-hand side. Between the tree trunks the Haikko fjard can be seen glistening in the sunshine. Large and wide painting. Signed A. Edelfelt 1882. Painted at Haikko during August and September 1882 (final touches were made in Paris in the coming year's November and December by the order of the Empress Dagmar for 10 000 francs).”⁶

Thus, *Under the Birches* became the second artwork in the Empress' collection with Edelfelt's sister as a model. In both paintings, *Under the Birches* and *Dear Friends*, Berta is portrayed in the most endearing way that conveys a child's carefree spirit and lightheartedness. In *Under the Birches*, she is pictured laying on her back, with crossed legs and a hay straw in her mouth, seemingly submerged in her own thoughts. Her older sister Annie is pictured sitting underneath a large birch tree with her back leaning against the trunk, reading a book that rests on her lap.

⁵ Sani Kontula-Webb et al., *Albert Edelfelt i Romanovy / Albert Edelfelt ja Romanovit*, Scientific-research Museum of the Russian Academy of Arts in St Petersburg, The Sinebrychhoff Art Museum in Helsinki, 2019–20 (St Petersburg, 2019), pp. 79–107.

⁶ Bertel Hintze, *Albert Edelfelt* (Porvoo, 1953), p. 531.

A printed image of the painting was published in a Swedish art publication “Små konstböcker”⁷ albeit with incorrect year and technique (1892, water colour) as well as in a book⁸ edited by artist’s sister Berta Edelfelt containing Edelfelt’s letter correspondence. The grainy black and white images give merely an obscure understanding of what the actual painting could be. Therefore, upon the rediscovery of the painting and particularly after its meticulous restoration conducted by the specialists of the National Museum in Warsaw; we can finally appreciate Edelfelt’s work in all its glory – with a vibrant green colour palette and fine details. During the restoration process interesting findings were made. For example, the artwork was clearly cut out of its frame and because of this the edges of the canvas lost three to four centimeters in length and width.⁹ Restorers also found small holes made by nails that indicate the painting had been fixed on another surface and would most likely have been on display somewhere. The painting is quite large, measuring 92.5 × 134.5 cm. It is signed and dated 1882 on the lower right corner of the canvas. The stamp of the art store where the canvas was purchased can be found a tergo. It reads: *Calteaux-bargue, couleurs fines Paris, Rue des Beaux-Arts 4.*

Edelfelt painted another version of the *Under the Birches* which is currently in a private collection.¹⁰ In this variant (*Under the Birches II*) Berta’s figure is replaced by an image of a young woman sitting on the grass facing the figure of reading Annie Edelfelt. Another significant difference is the size of the canvas: 59 × 81.5 cm. Several sketches for *Under the Birches* belong to the Ateneum Museum collection in Finland (figs. 2, 3). In these we can see the meticulous process that Edelfelt went through while looking for the optimal composition.

Regarding the provenance of the painting Hintze gives an intriguing piece of information: “The painting was originally placed in the Anichkoff Palace in St Petersburg, but according to the information given by the artist’s sisters, it was later taken to an Imperial castle in Poland.”¹¹ This important detail served as a starting point for further research of the painting’s provenance. In the 19th century there were three Imperial residencies in Poland: palaces in Białołęka and Skierniewice and a hunting lodge in Spała. Out of these three Spała had a special significance for the Imperial family as their favourite countryside residence. Emperor Alexander III and Empress Maria Feodorovna would spend many summers in Spała enjoying fresh air, hunting, and having outdoor dinners right in the forest. All this pastime has been captured in numerous photographs. *Under the Birches* would have fitted the Spała residence thematically and one could assume the Empress would have ordered the painting to be moved there. A proof for this assumption can be found in a photograph taken in 1924 of the White Salon in the Spała lodge, where the painting can be clearly seen on the wall (fig. 4). The photograph was published in a research *Pałac i ludzie. Historia rezydencji myśliwskiej w Spale 1885–1945* conducted by historians Michał Słoniewski and Swietlana Czestnych.¹²

Details concerning the painting’s initial transportation from St Petersburg to Spała are not verified, but the Emperor’s visits to the Polish residence have been documented well.

⁷ *Små konstböcker*, no. 12 (1911), Albert Edelfelt, p. 32.

⁸ Berta Edelfelt, *Ur Albert Edelfelts brev. Resor och intryck* (Helsingfors, 1921), [n.p.].

⁹ Renata Lisowska, Piotr Lisowski, Conservation documentation of the Albert Edelfelt’s *Under the Birches*, The National Museum in Warsaw, dated 1 June 2019.

¹⁰ Albert Edelfelt, op. cit., fig. p. 209.

¹¹ Hintze, Albert Edelfelt, op. cit., p. 531.

¹² Michał Słoniewski, Swietlana Czestnych, *Pałac i ludzie. Historia rezydencji myśliwskiej w Spale 1885–1945*, Spała 2014, fig. 104, p. 152.

Alexander III and Maria Feodorovna visited Spała regularly, every two years between 1886 and 1894.¹³ Over this time, the residence was renovated and extended. An extension of the Petersburg–Warsaw Railway was built to provide a direct connection between Spała and the imperial capital. The painting was most likely brought to Spała in 1890 or 1892 while the residence was actively decorated.

After Alexander III's death, his son Nikolai II continued to use the hunting lodge up until 1912. During the First World War, in December 1914, Spała was occupied by German troops. Fortunately, the serving staff of the lodge had the opportunity to evacuate valuables beforehand. Among these items was the painting *Under the Birches* as can be seen on the hand-over documents¹⁴ kept at the Russian State Historical Archive.

After the Treaty of Riga in 1923 the painting was returned to Poland¹⁵ and eventually to Spała. At this point Spała lodge served as an official residence for the Polish president Stanisław Wojciechowski. The photograph of the White Salon with *Under the Birches* visible in the background was taken in 1924, a year after it was returned. In September 1939 with starting of the Second World War Spała was occupied by the Germans for the second time. Once again, the valuables of the palace were evacuated.¹⁶ This was most likely the moment when *Under the Birches* was cut out of the frame and taken from Spała for good.

However, the painting did not travel very far as in 2018 it was discovered less than 100 km from Spała, in Łódź. The canvas was found without a frame, rolled up and stored in the attic of a private house. Unfortunately, the owner did not have information how or when the painting ended up in their family's possession. The timing of the rediscovery coincided with the preparation of the *Albert Edelfelt and the Romanovs* exhibition which was curated by the author of this article and arranged in 2019 at the Scientific-research Museum of the Russian Academy of arts in St Petersburg, and then in 2020 at the Sinebrychhoff Art Museum in Helsinki.¹⁷ In the latter exhibition the *Under the Birches* was shown to the public for the first time in decades.

In 2021 the painting was donated to become part of the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw. It is wonderful that it now continues to be in public view after all the years it stayed hidden.

¹³ Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁴ Russian State Historical Archive, Files of the Cabinet of His Imperial Majesty, Transfer acts of cases and items of the Duchy of Łowicz sent to be stored at the Kremlin Armoury in Moscow, started 19 July 1914 finished 27 August 1914, f. 468, op. 45, d. 155. The author would like to express her sincere gratitude to Swietlana Czestnych for providing this material.

¹⁵ Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie, Ministerstwo Wyznań Religijnych i Oświecenia Publicznego, rewindykacja obiektu, sygn. 7083 [The Central Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw, Ministry of Religious and Public Education, object recovery, ref. no. 7083]. The author would like to express her sincere gratitude to Michał Słoniewski for providing this material.

¹⁶ Słoniewski, Czestnych, op. cit., p. 233.

¹⁷ See n. 5.