

# SISTERS ON STAGE

Pernille Koldbech Fich

© Louise Wolthers 2004

*Translated from Danish: Louise Cambell*

Who are Marie, Erna and the other sisters? First of all, they are 'diakonisser', which means by the church ordained nurses for the poorly and weakened. But they are of course also individual human beings – and it is these individuals, Pernille Koldbech Fich portrays in her photographs. One soon discovers, though, that the person and the foundation cannot be separated, and the images thematize precisely this union between private life and work, the diakonissemovement entails. This task, which is both medical, social and religious, is far more than merely a job. A diakonisse dedicates her life to the foundation and its tasks. What is generally understood as a 'normal life', i.e. having a family, is rejected for the cause of helping people in need. The Photo-series Sisters is a tribute to those people, who inhabit and vitalise the 100 year old Skt. Lukas Foundation in Copenhagen.

When one hears about diakonisser, it is typically their acts of good that are described. But Pernille Koldbech Fich removes focus from this, which otherwise makes them who they are. This is unusual, both for the portrayed and the viewer, and the actual arrangement of many of the images emphasises that here the diakonisser themselves are the point of focus: Marie sits on a rather too high chair in a large, almost empty room. She seems small, a little fragile, but certainly not lost – she is seen in frog perspective and casts an intelligent look at the viewer.

The flash acts as a sort of spotlight and provides associations to a scene – one can literally imagine oneself as being in the audience of a one woman show. Marie is alone, but she is not lonely: she is connected to the other sisters in the exhibition, and visually this connection is made through her attire. Apart from pointing out a unity, the dress also symbolises the similarity between diakonisses, financially as well as workwise. In other words, social differences are wiped out, and this has, in earlier times in particular, given poorly socially positioned women new possibilities.

The more dramatic image of Henny also plays with the theme of staging. The curtain, which frames the picture, reminds one of a theatre curtain, and the rug reminds one of a red carpet. The fact that Henny is the center of attention is also accentuated by the symmetry between floor and ceiling in the image, and the closets which stand on each side of her.

The curtain also adds mystery to the picture – an atmosphere which is further emphasised by Henny posing with a pillow under her arm. In other words, the image, just as the other images in the exhibition, leaves a number of questions unanswered.

It is not the photographers intention to document or reveal 'the person behind the uniform'. The women are staged with respectful distance, and we are not given a simple answer to who they are. The curtain also creates a certain distance to us, the viewers, thereby keeping certain elements of Hennys private sphere hidden. Just as when the camera zooms in on Tora sitting on her bed, an otherwise very intimate place. With the David Lynch-like setup, Pernille Koldbech Fich also thematizes an enterpretation of diakonisser as being exotic, and certainly alien in relation to modern ways of life. But the images also generate reflections about the viewers own life, and the norms for this.

The subtly mysterious air in the photograpgs stimulates the imagination. Thus Carla and Christiane are positioned in near naked rooms, which nevertheless don't seem empty. The light and the white tones symbolise traditional spirituality, and one can view the images of the sisters as icons of sort, where something divine is also represented.

In the portrait of Christiane there are furthermore reminiscences of the interiors of Hammershøi, where the room itself is intensified, and open doors lead to something unknown. Like Christiane, Carla stands in the middle of the floor, and seems almost unshakable, which is emphasised by the parallel between her and the closet, which stands out from the wall. All in all the pictures are distinctly static. Particularly formally, where vertical and horizontal lines dominate, as in the portraits of Dagmar, Tora and Erna. The latter is furthermore controlled by a clear cut symmetry, the two halves of the image could almost be mirrors of one another. We also see notable repetitions three (which is a religious figure) times: The three corners of the table cloth, the paintings, the carvings in the sofa, indeed also the shades from the lamp are repeated in Toras bonnet.

The wall clock in the photograph of Dagmar encourages thematizing of the time in the portraits. Predominant is again the static, the silent – the images are not snapshots, in fact they initially seem more like paintings, and they can also be perceived as a critical renewal of the tradition for the bourgeois portrait, where it was (and is) the powerful men of society, who pose. Also the diakonisser are now immortalized, perhaps to become part of a future story about the foundation. The past is altogether a thematic element: furniture, paintings and other objects refer to the past century, just as the dress, which hasn't changed much since the mid 1800's.

The Danish diakonisse movement was founded in 1863 and provided women with an opportunity to educate themselves within nursing combined with Christianity. The foundation offered a meaningful, outgoing unity and independent lifestyle; an alternative to the patriarchal marriage.

Sisters motivates a comparison of the role of the woman in a traditional family – who earns what and why? – as an example. The perspective of women's politics and the history of women is under all circumstances relevant, when studying the diakonisses in relation to the gender-conscious and secularised present. Today the showdown with regards to the idea of the woman as being naturally self sacrificing is in full action, but these women have voluntarily chosen an identity based on professional care and charity, and this deserves great respect.

Ingrid's living room resembles the home of many elderly women, but one item will not be found among the belongings of diakonisses of her generation: the typical family pictures of husband, children and grand children. Not until 1995 was it permitted for diakonisses at the Skt. Lukas Foundation to marry, so the portrayed sisters are themselves each others near relations. Thus this exhibition can be seen as their family album.