

ENGLISH

EARTH BODY SPIRIT

The lost work of Inga Parn

VERLEGER

Länggasse Galerie
Länggassestrasse 28
3012 Bern
Schweiz

info@langgassegalerie.ch
@Länggasse-Galerie

© Länggasse Galerie 2020

Alle Rechte vorbehalten. Kein Teil dieser Veröffentlichung darf ohne vorherige Genehmigung in irgendeiner Form oder auf irgendeine Weise, elektronisch oder manuell, einschließlich Fotokopie, Aufzeichnung oder eines Informationsspeicher- und -abrufsystems, reproduziert oder übertragen werden.

DESIGN

Mark Noad Design

DRUCKER

Boss Print

ISBN 978-90-73313-38-5

EARTH BODY SPIRIT

The lost work of Inga Parn

That which is alien – shards of filthy metal,
invisible microbes – enter the body and
spread while what is human – blood, viscera,
consciousness – leave the body and dissipate,
what remains is but a hollow vessel, a shell.

Inga Parn, 1918 from a letter to her sister

Before we start, I should warn you that this is an incomplete story. Inga Parn has remained frustratingly elusive and my efforts to understand her and her work have led me down many blind alleys. Having said that, I have found out far more about “IP” than I ever expected and, in the process, uncovered a woman at the very heart of the most dynamic period of art in the twentieth century.

FINDING INGA

My involvement began by chance during the final year of my studies in Brighton. A tutor suggested I contact the Kunst Museum Bern who were at that time cataloguing the Gurlitt Collection and wanted more help with the material in French. I arranged a two-month placement. The main artworks had been identified but there were still many boxes of correspondence and paperwork to go through to help establish the provenance of the works.

Towards the end of the third week, I was presented with a box of documents relating to various Parisian galleries among them, a portfolio containing the eighteen works displayed here. They had a preliminary designation of ‘Artist Unknown: Status Amber’*. The works – all watercolour on paper – were signed with the IP monogram and dated variously 1931, 1932 and 1933. One other document accompanied the paintings which I was told was a delivery note from the seller, the gallery of Berthe Weill and dated 17 May 1934.

The note had obviously been written quickly and was difficult to decipher, but it soon became clear that, although written on Weill Gallery notepaper it was not a delivery note but a personal message from the artist:

Herr Gurlitt,

Mme Weill has just told me you have bought my works, thank you so much! I am sorry I was not here last week to meet you in person and to see Wassily again. Maybe we can meet next time you are in Paris.

Thank you again

Inga

Her personality shone out to me through the wonderful images and those few brief, excitable words, I wanted to know more about Inga.

The records of the Weill Gallery are now held at the Archives Nationales in Paris and after some persuasion (as I was only a student placement), my supervisor agreed to me going. Two weeks later, in a dimly lit room deep in the Archives, I found the entry in a sales ledger:

9 May 1934

Item 1: Inga Parn – Corpus series
Twelve watercolours on paper, each 25x18cm

Item 2: Inga Parn – Terra series
Six watercolours on paper, each 25x18cm

Item 3: Inga Parn – Spiritus series
Six watercolours on paper, each 25x18cm

Item 4: Inga Parn – Terra Ambusti
Oil on canvass 75x60cm

Buyer: Hildebrand Gurlitt

*Amber status is applied to works where the origin is unknown and may be Nazi-era looted works

My immediate delight that I had identified IP was quickly overtaken by the realisation that I had no idea who Inga Parn was. On returning to Bern, my supervisor was also delighted, he could now reclassify these works as 'Green Status', legitimately purchased. But, despite my pleas, he was not interested in finding out more about Inga, instead I was told to move on to my next archive box.

I asked if I could see the oil painting mentioned in the ledger but was informed that there were no unidentified oil paintings from that time in the collection. For the rest of my placement, I was distracted wondering who Inga was and where the missing paintings – the oil and six watercolours – were.

My curiosity would not subside, on returning home to Geneva, I began to look for more information. Google can be very unhelpful at times, most searches for 'Inga Parn' end in Estonian Facebook pages. But Parn is an unusual name in Paris and one link, several pages into the search proved useful, a reference in an academic article on infection control to 'Archive Parn' in Senlis near Paris. Further searches bring a contact name, Pierre Rosselle and email.

Only after I send the message do I consider how odd it must be to receive a 'Request for information on Inga Parn' from a complete stranger. Over the next three weeks, I continue in vain to find other leads. I can find no references to Inga in any papers from the period. Then at last a response from Pierre: "Inga was my grandmother's sister but we do not have much about her in the family archive."

'Not much' is still more than I have so I arrange to visit Pierre in Senlis.

THE EARLY YEARS

The Parn Archive comprises the papers of Alvar Parn, an Estonian physician and pioneer of infection control who moved to Paris in 1891 to work with Louis Pasteur in the early days of the Institut Pasteur. It was here that he met Eloise Karam, daughter of a Maronite Christian émigré from the Levant; they had three children, Marie-Louise, August and Inga.

In 1915, the eldest, Marie-Louise married Anton Roselle and moved to his family home in Senlis. She worked with her father to manage his research papers and collated what is now known as the Parn Archive. Fortunately for our story, Marie-Louise also accumulated a large archive of family records and was a prolific diarist. It is from this material that I have been able to piece together details of the life of Inga Parn.

Pierre is a wonderful host but on my first visit, he spent a lot of time apologising that, unlike the Archive Parn, his family papers were not catalogued and it would not be easy to find things. But he offered to let me go through everything at my leisure and I was welcome to stay in the converted stable block at the end of the garden. Over that Summer, I made many visits to Senlis staying for days at a time and making my commute through the garden to the library to read the diaries of Marie-Louise.

I would discuss exciting discoveries over lunch with Pierre and often the next day or on my next visit, he would have found something – a letter or photograph – related to the events in the diary.

What I know for certain is this. Inga Parn was born in Paris on 30 October 1900, Marie-Louise had just turned nine and August was six. The family was well connected and an established part of the academic community in what was then the most dynamic and exciting city in the world. In 1906, Inga's mother Eloise died suddenly (we could find no record of how and why) and it seems that, to deal with his grief, her father retreated into his work and became distant. Marie-Louise took on



Inga c.1910

a surrogate parent role to her two siblings and it is about this time that she began her diaries.

From this point, things are less certain but I have been able to identify or infer some key moments in Inga's life.

She appears to have been academically gifted and studied at Collège Sévigné where she became friends with Irène Curie, two years her senior. Irène often took Inga to her mother's laboratory where they sometimes helped with experiments or even carried out their own. But the outbreak of war interrupted their friendship. While Irène was old enough to go to the front line and help Marie with her life-saving portable x-ray machines, the 'Petite Curies', Inga had to finish her studies. She moved with Marie-Louise to Senlis and, around the same time, her brother August enlisted in the French army.

Late in 1917, Inga signed up as a nurse and for the next year tended the casualties of war in many different hospitals. But as the war neared its end, Spanish Flu took hold among the troops and this had a profound effect on Inga. In a letter to Marie-Louise dated 21 October 1918 she writes:

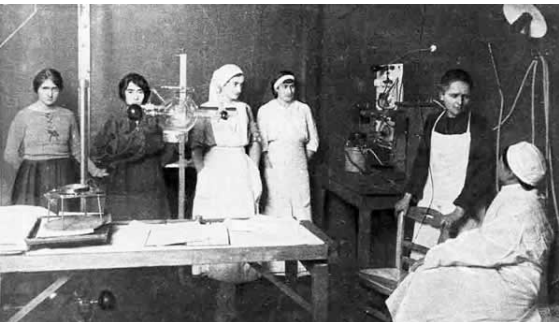
Why when Papa and Mme Curie are discovering such powerful medicines that seem so wonderful are people still dying in their thousands? I have watched as fit, healthy young men who have survived the worst that war can bring turn blue then black while we can only mop their brows helplessly. I thought I could make a difference but I was so wrong.

Soon afterwards, news came through that August was one of the victims of the flu.

Inga did not arrive back in Senlis until the Spring of 1919, I believe she was hospitalised as the result of a breakdown caused by her experiences in the war and her brother's death. The following diary entry shocked me:

I can't imagine what Inga has been through. It's a week now since Anton collected her from the hospital in Dieppe, she has said nothing and does not meet my eyes. I don't think she has slept more than a few minutes.

...Once more my sister's hopes and belief have been betrayed, how I wish she did not approach her ventures so wholeheartedly but she has always been so.



Inga (second from left) with Marie Curie
c.1915

NEW BEGINNINGS

For the next two years, there are few mentions of Inga but it is clear she is still living with her sister's family while struggling to overcome the trauma. Then in June 1921:

Our housekeeper Séraphine has been so kind to Inga. They have spent many hours together walking through the fields and she has even persuaded Inga to try painting. Slowly I see the spirit returning in my sister.

I mentioned this to Pierre over lunch, he replied: "Ah, in that case there is something you should see." He led me to a small room on the first floor and there, above the fireplace was a beautiful painting of foliage immediately recognisable as the work of Séraphine Louis. 'This was my grandmother's favourite' he said.

As we turned to leave, I saw a small oil painting on the wall behind the door. "What's that?" I asked. Pierre replied that it was just

another of the family's paintings but he did not know its origin. I asked if I could have a closer look and we moved it to the desk by the window. There was no obvious signature but turning it over, there in the corner was a small, faint monogram IP and the date 36.

I don't think I have ever been more excited than I was at that moment (indeed Pierre felt obliged to offer me a glass of brandy). Once I had calmed down, my academic brain regained control with the realisation this was not the missing painting from the Weill Gallery, it was far too small, this was another work by Inga Parn.

S raphine's influence was a turning point in Inga's life, she now turns her 'wholehearted approach' to the pursuit of art. As Marie-Louise comments: "she is obsessed with the idea of creating beauty and experiments with paint as a scientist experiments with chemicals".

By the Autumn of 1922, Inga is back in Paris living in Montmartre, taking work as a studio assistant where she can, working in bars at other times. In her diaries, Marie-Louise is coy about her sister's relationships but there are hints at several. I suspect that Inga may also have been modelling for her artist friends but only one letter gives evidence for this:

I will not sit for Gwen again, she is too intense and my lack of faith unsettles her. I fear she wants to 'save' me!

...She let me have this drawing to give to you, oh how I wish I could draw like her.

This letter was folded into one of the diaries and not known to Pierre. In it, she gives her address as La Ruche, which at the time was a complex of studios and temporary home to many influential artists including Marc Chagall, Robert Delaunay, Constantin Br ncusi, and Diego Rivera. Inga will have been exposed to all the new ideas and directions developing at the time.

One morning while I was working in the library, Pierre laid the small Gwen John sketch on the table in front of me. 'I knew we had it somewhere' he said.

In 1926, Marie-Louise and Anton, obviously concerned by Inga's free-wheeling approach to life, decide to pay for her to attend the Acad mie Moderne founded by Fernand L ger. There is no record her achievements at the Acad mie but, a year later at the recommendation of her professor Aleksandra Ekster, Inga transfers to the Bauhaus, a move that proves a catalyst for her creativity.

My dear Inga arrived unexpectedly yesterday, she looks radiant with her short-cropped hair and tailored trousers! Such a delight to see her again, the darkness is not with her at the moment and we all laughed more than I can remember, the two of us sat up until dawn talking, so much to catch up on. As ever, she is so excited about her latest passion, I do hope that this time her studies are a match for her ambition.

At the time of writing, I have not yet been able to study the archives of the Bauhaus to find out more about Inga's time there. But, once more, Pierre produced a photo from the family archive showing Inga with her classmates including Anni Albers.

By the early 1930s, Inga is living in Paris again and practicing as an artist. I now believe the Wassily mentioned in the Weill Gallery note to be Wassily Kandinsky, one of Inga's Professors at the Bauhaus who moved to Paris in 1934. He knew both Hildebrand Gurlitt and Berthe Weill and was ideally placed to make the introduction.



Drawing of Inga by Gwen John c.1923



Inga (far right) with classmates including Anni Albers at the Bauhaus 1927

THE TRAIL GOES COLD

Pierre never met his great aunt but recalls his mother telling him of her only meeting with Inga at the age of thirteen just before the Second World War. She described it as being:

like a bright light and whirlwind had arrived together. For two days and nights the house was filled with noise, laughter and excitement, it was exhilarating. And then the peace of Senlis returned. Mama was very quiet for many days after.

This is the last record I have of Inga.

Pierre had warned me that the archive was incomplete and now that reality left me stranded. The diaries stopped, Marie-Louise either stopped writing due to the war or they were lost in the war. Other materials focussed on Marie-Louise and Anton's growing family and their emergence into a post-war world. It was possible he said, that Inga had moved abroad and maybe even married in which case if I am to continue the story, I may need to look for a different name in a different country but with no idea where to start.

So many questions remain unanswered. What happened to Inga, did she keep painting? Did she ever get to meet Hildebrand Gurlitt, they would have had much to talk about, both lost siblings at around the same time – there are many works by Cornelia Gurlitt in the collection. If she lived a long life, there may be people alive today who met her, who knew her and might even have her work on their wall.

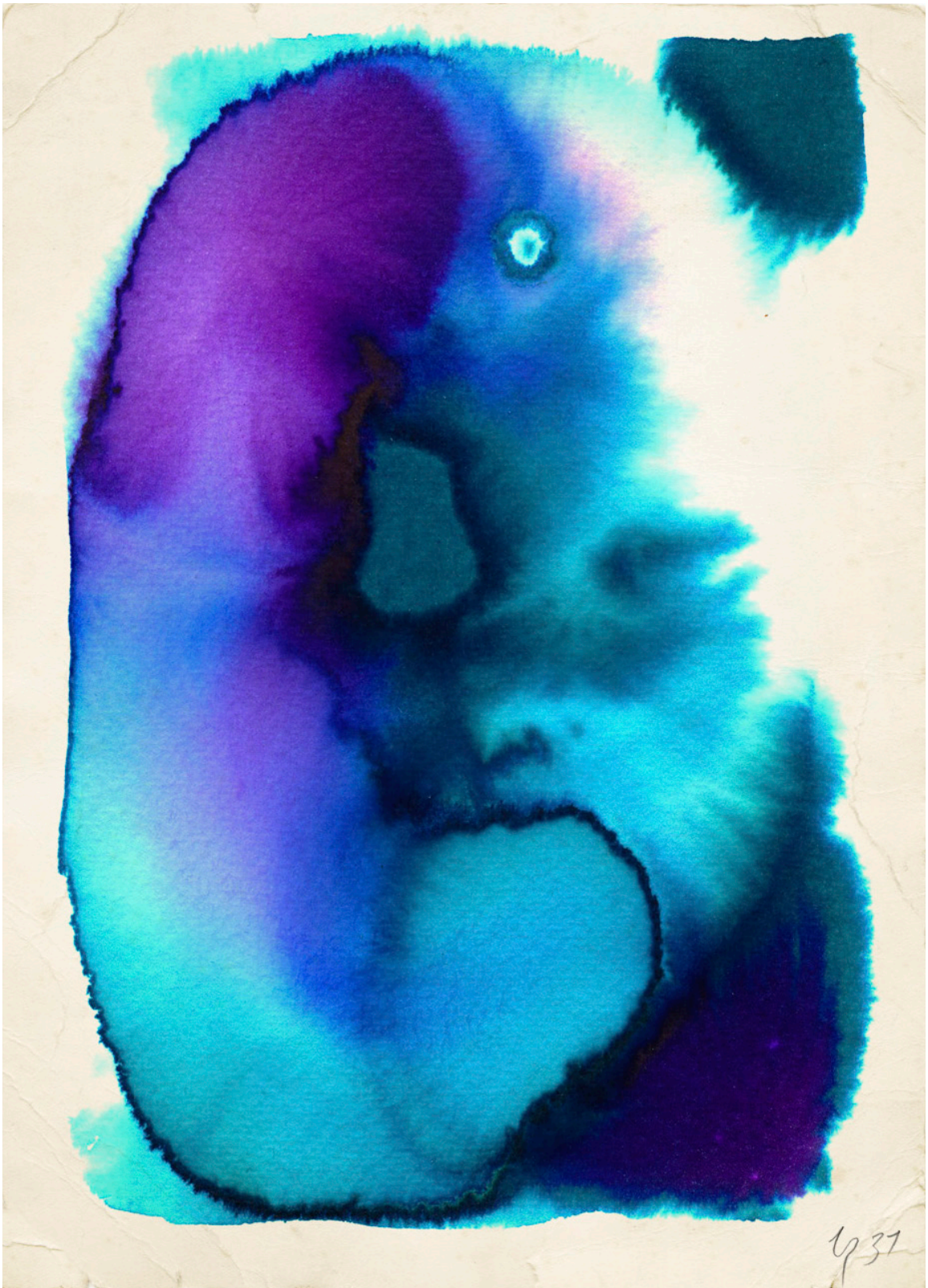
For now, I am still researching the artists of Paris in the 20s and 30s hoping for new clues. There are many anonymous female faces and bodies in the art of the time, I wonder how many of them are Inga. My search continues.

From starting on this journey, I've gone from academic to detective to storyteller. I have identified only the fifth female artist in the 1,500 works in the Gurlitt collection, one of many unrecognised woman in the story of the development of modern art.

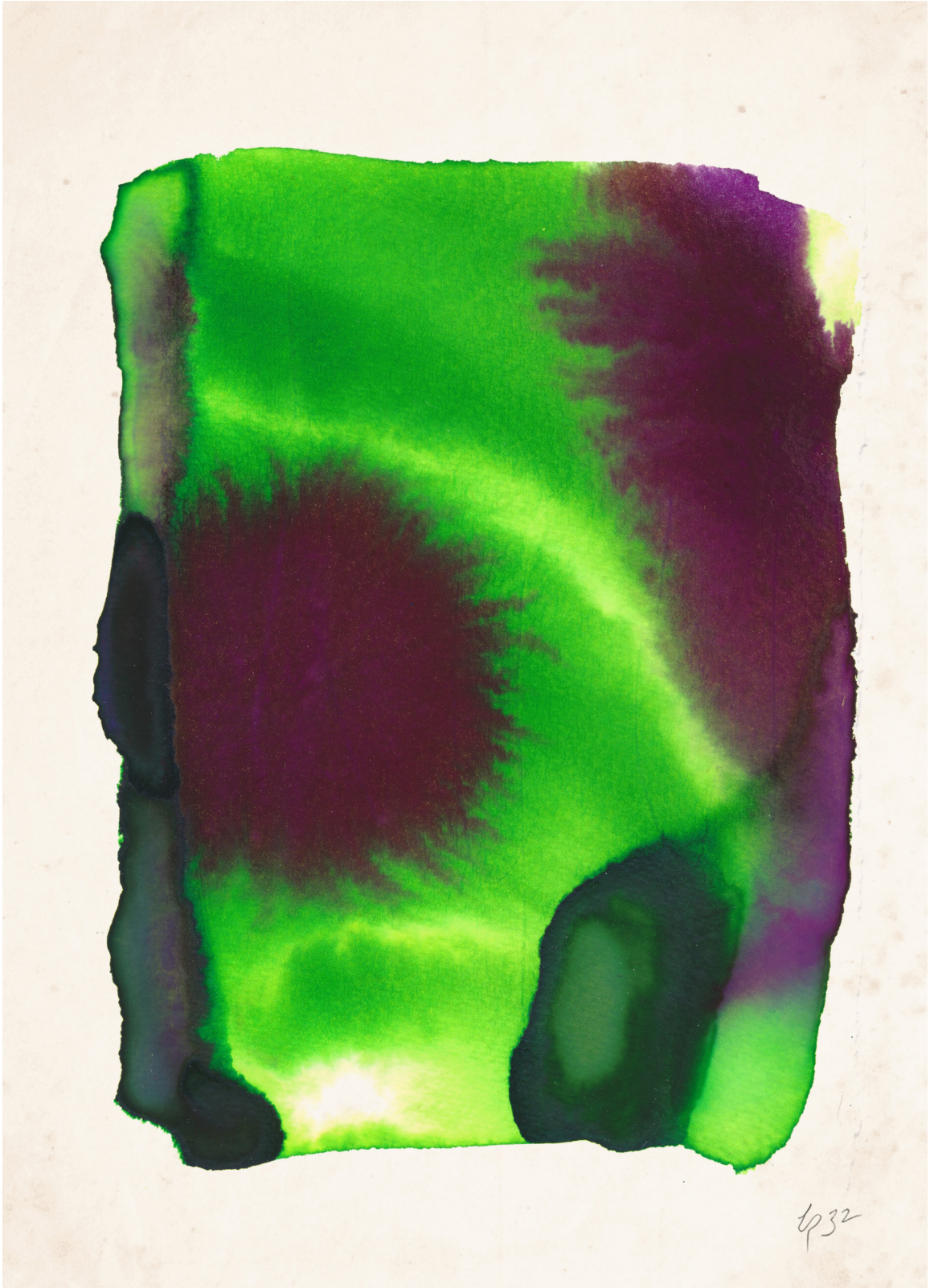
The work exhibited here is all that is currently known of Inga's output. My hope is that like the Swedish pioneer of abstract art Hilma af Klint, she continued to paint and to keep her work to be shown only after her death. Somewhere there may be an attic full of treasure waiting to be uncovered and Inga Parn can take her place in the story of Twentieth Century art.

Dr Suzanne de Nîmes
Curator

SPIRITUS

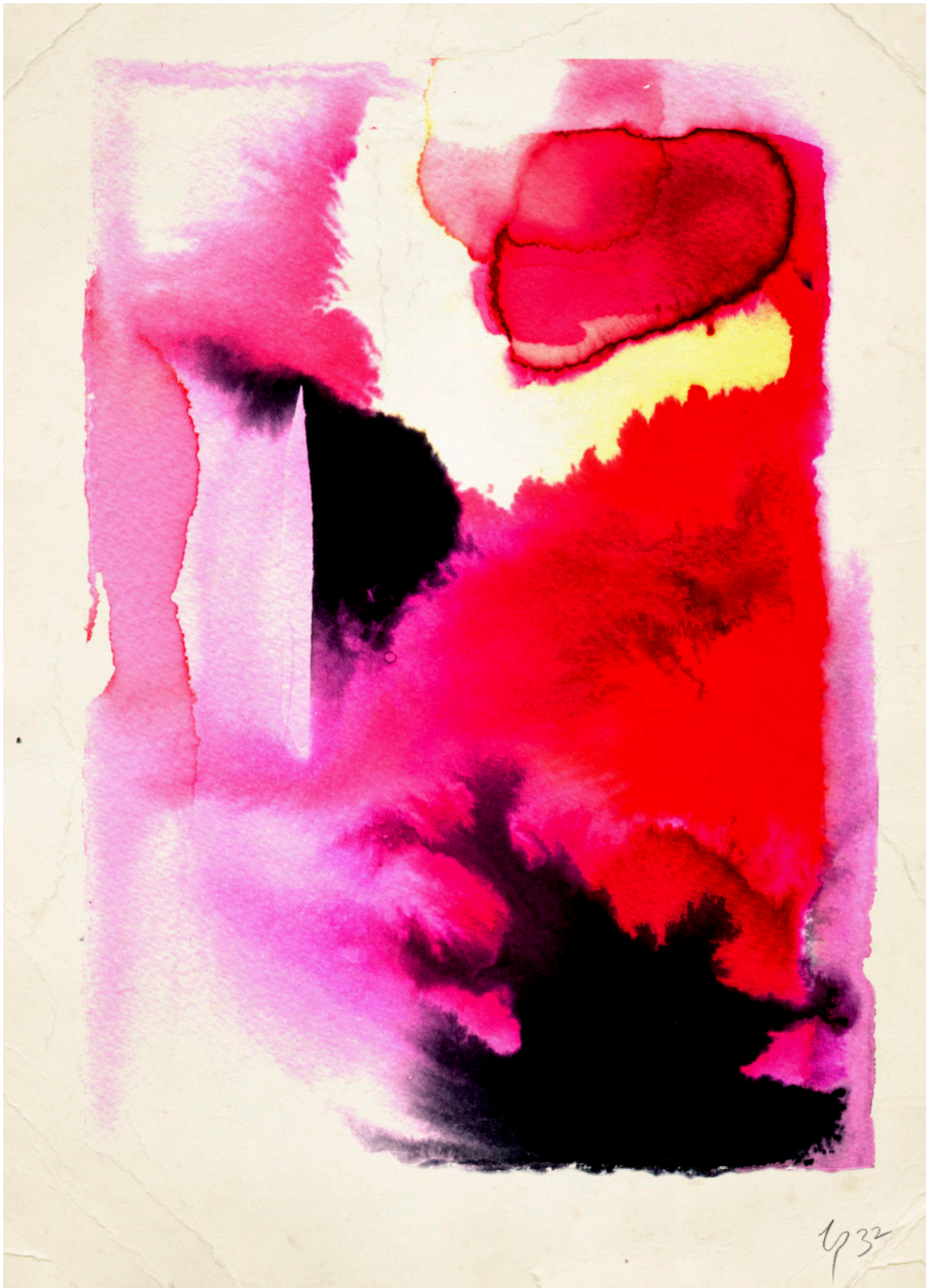






TERRA



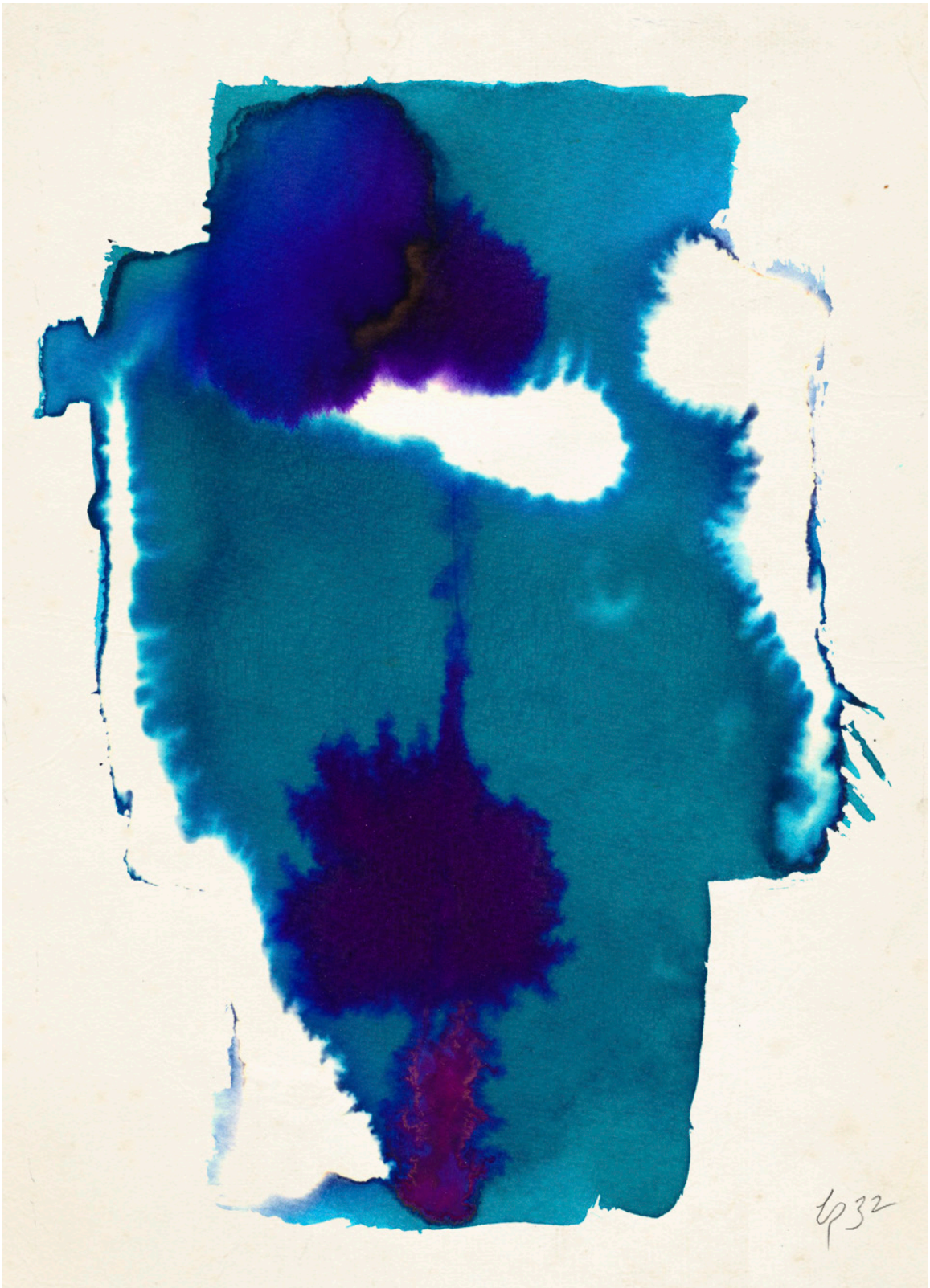




CORPUS























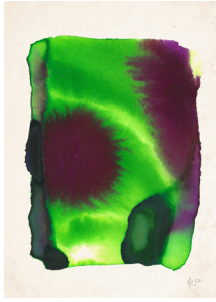
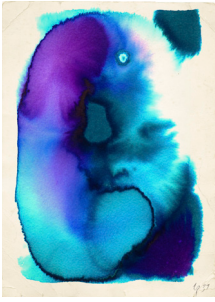


TITLE UNKNOWN



SPIRITUS

1931-32 Watercolour on paper each 18x25cm



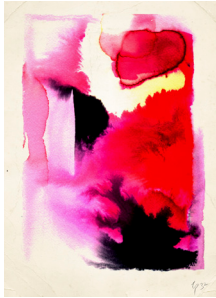
Location unknown

Location unknown

Location unknown

TERRA

1932 Watercolour on paper each 18x25cm



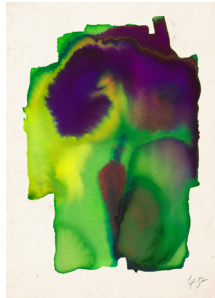
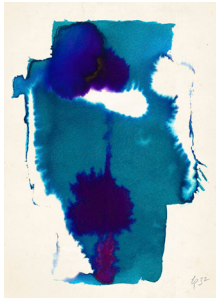
Location unknown

Location unknown

Location unknown

CORPUS

1932-33 Watercolour on paper each 18x25cm



TITLE UNKNOWN

1936 Oil on canvass 30x40cm



TERRA AMBUSTI

Date unknown Oil on canvass 60x75cm

Location unknown

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Kunst Museum Bern for sparking this adventure and setting me on the trail of Inga Parn. I am grateful for their trust in loaning the works for this exhibition. I will forever be indebted to Pierre Rosselle for tolerating this crazy Swiss woman and for his enthusiasm and support during my time delving through the family archives, without him this story would not be known. Thank you Pierre for agreeing to loan the oil painting that has not left your grandmother's room for almost a century. And lastly, thanks to the Länggasse Galerie for being bold enough to make this their first exhibition, I wish you every success for the future.

ABOUT THE CURATOR

Dr Suzanne de Nîmes was born in Geneva. She studied Art History at the Courtauld Institute, before doing an MA in Curating Collections and Heritage at the University of Brighton. Sue has recently completed a PhD at the Hochschule der Kunst Bern based around her continuing research into female artists of the 20s and 30s and, in particular, her experience unravelling the story of Inga Parn.



9 789073 313385