E. Thoresen.















ELSA THORESEN



E. Thoresen.

INTRODUCTION



Surrealistiskt landskap (Surrealist Landscape), 1937, oil on canvas, 69 x 59 cm

Elsa Thoresen (1906–1994)

Born in Benson, Minnesota, in 1906, into a family of Norwegian heritage, Elsa Thoresen became a distinctive figure in Scandinavian Surrealism. Her father was Norwegian, while her American-born mother was the daughter of Norwegian immigrants. Raised between American and Norwegian cultural influences, she developed an artistic identity shaped by her international background and interest in modern artistic expression. Her early training and exposure to European modernism led her toward Surrealism. Through her work, Thoresen developed a deeply personal visual language that combined elements of fantasy, symbolism, and psychological exploration.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Thoresen became associated with the Scandinavian avant-garde, particularly through her relationship and artistic collaboration with Danish Surrealist Vilhelm Bjerke-Petersen. Together, they participated in the development of Surrealism in Denmark and the wider Nordic region, contributing to a movement that challenged traditional approaches to representation and artistic expression. While many of her contemporaries explored provocative or politically charged imagery, Thoresen pursued a more introspective form of Surrealism, creating dreamlike compositions in which organic forms, mysterious landscapes and unexpected transformations suggest hidden emotional and psychological realities.



Composition, 1948, oil on canvas
65 x 77 x 3 cm

What distinguishes Thoresen is the poetic sensitivity of her imagination and her ability to transform the familiar into something enigmatic and otherworldly. Her paintings often bring together fluid shapes, ambiguous spaces, and symbolic imagery, creating an atmosphere that exists between reality and dreams. Rather than presenting fixed narratives, her works invite viewers to explore the unconscious and discover their own interpretations.

Elsa Thoresen is increasingly recognized as an important voice in Scandinavian Surrealism, whose distinctive artistic vision helped broaden the movement's expressive and imaginative possibilities.

E. Thoresen.

BIOGRAPHY



Elsa Thoresen in Oslo, 1938. Courtesy of Alice Tompkins, Estate of Elsa Thoresen.



Elsa Thoresen, Strandens ansigt (The Face of the Beach), 1939, oil on canvas. Private collection.

1906

1 Early Life

Born in Benson, Minnesota, in 1906, into a family of Norwegian heritage. Her multicultural upbringing shaped her artistic identity and later engagement with European modernism.

1920s–Early 1930s

2 Pursued her artistic education and developed an interest in modern painting, exploring experimental forms of expression that would eventually lead her toward Surrealism.

Mid-1930s

3 Became involved in the Scandinavian Surrealist movement, developing a distinctive visual language combining dreamlike imagery, organic forms, and psychological symbolism.

1936–1938

4 Exhibited alongside leading Surrealists in Copenhagen and Paris. Participated in the landmark 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition, with her work featured in André Breton's Abridged Dictionary of Surrealism.

1944–1953

5 Relocated to Sweden during World War II, developing a more personal style inspired by natural forms and imaginary landscapes. Participated in the 1947 International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris.

1953–1994

6 Returned to the United States in 1953 and settled in Seattle the following year, continuing to explore lyrical abstraction and organic forms until her death in 1994. Today, she is increasingly recognized as an important figure in Scandinavian Surrealism.

E. Thoresen.

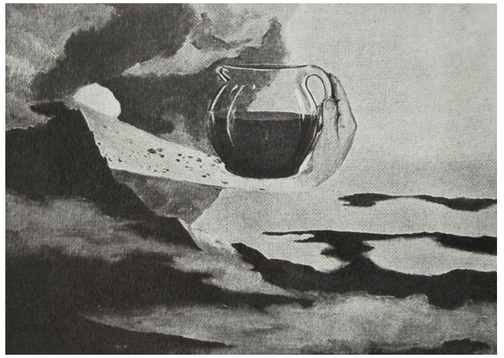
International Exhibitions & Visibility

A defining moment in her career came in 1938, when André Breton selected two of her paintings for the International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris, organized with Paul Éluard. Her painting Atmospheric Landscape (1936) was reproduced in Breton's *Abridged Dictionary of Surrealism* in 1938, while Abstract Composition (1935), now part of the Tangen Collection at Kunstsilo Museum in Kristiansand, Norway, was featured in Sophie Taeuber-Arp's magazine Plastique, no. 3, 1938, p. 11.

These achievements established her presence within the international avant-garde and led to a joint exhibition with Bjerke-Petersen in Oslo in 1939. During World War II, Thoresen relocated to Sweden, where she developed a unique visual language inspired by driftwood and natural objects collected along the coast. These weathered forms became recurring elements in her Surrealist compositions. Her international recognition continued in 1947, when her work was included in the International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris, organized by André Breton and Marcel Duchamp, further establishing her contribution to European Surrealism.



Abstract Composition, 1935, oil on canvas, 46 x 38 cm



Atmospheric landscape, 1936, oil on canvas, 46 x 63 cm

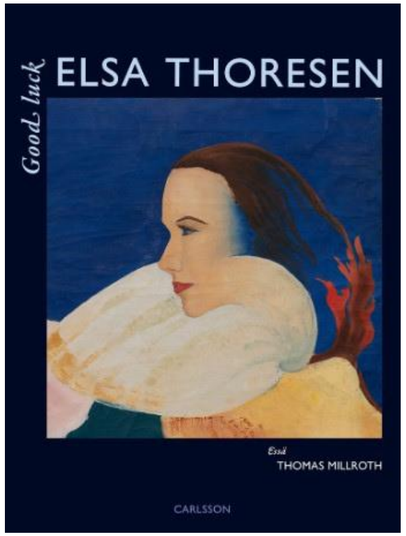
International Exhibitions & Visibility

In recent years, Thoresen's artistic legacy has received renewed international attention. A significant milestone was the retrospective *Objects of the Elements: The Art of Elsa Thoresen*, held at the Cascadia Art Museum in Edmonds, Washington, USA, from December 3, 2025 to March 8, 2026. The exhibition marked the first major American museum presentation dedicated to her work, highlighting her contributions to Surrealism and her later explorations of lyrical abstraction.

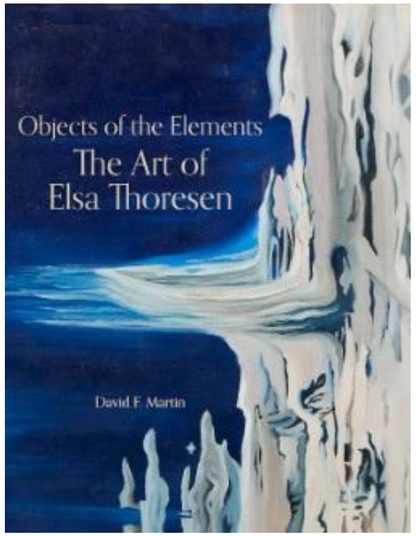
This renewed recognition has been accompanied by a growing body of scholarly publications examining Thoresen's artistic achievements, including Thomas Millroth's *Good Luck Elsa Thoresen* (2024) and David F. Martin's *Objects of the Elements: The Art of Elsa Thoresen* (2025). These publications have expanded access to scholarship on her life and work, contributing to a broader reassessment of her significance within twentieth-century modernism and international Surrealism.



Objects of the Elements: The Art of Elsa Thoresen, Cascadia Art Museum in Edmonds, Washington, USA, December 2025 to March 2026



Good luck Elsa Thoresen ,by Thomas Millroth, published by Carlsson bokförlag, Stockholm, August 2024.



Objects of the Elements The Art of Elsa Thoresen, by David F. Martin, published by Cascadia Art Museum, December 2025

EVOLUTION OF ARTISTIC STYLE AND THEMES

Early Period (1920s–1935) — Academic Foundations and Modernist Exploration

Elsa Thoresen's early artistic development was shaped by her formal training at the Academy of Fine Arts in Oslo and the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Brussels during the late 1920s. Her exposure to European modernism encouraged her to move beyond traditional representation and experiment with abstraction, form, and composition.

By the mid-1930s, her work increasingly reflected the influence of Surrealism, incorporating imaginative structures and unconventional visual relationships. Her “Abstract Composition” (1935), later reproduced in Sophie Taeuber-Arp's journal Plastique, no. 3, 1938, p.11, representing an important milestone in her transition toward the international avant-garde.



Untitled, 1927, oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm



Abstract Composition, 1935, oil on canvas, 46 x 38 cm

E. Thoresen.

EVOLUTION OF ARTISTIC STYLE AND THEMES

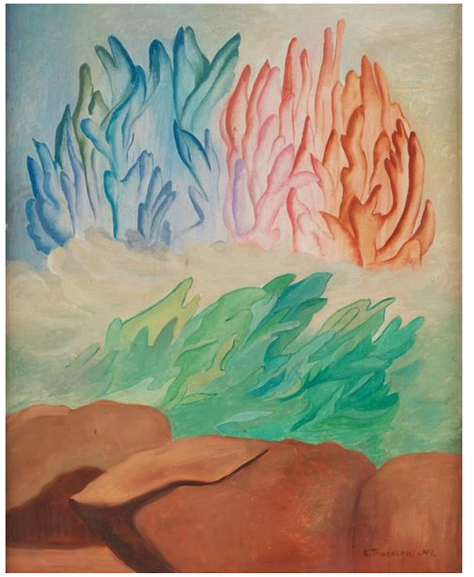
Middle Period (1935–1946) — Surrealism and the Subconscious

Following her marriage to Vilhelm Bjerke-Petersen in 1935, Thoresen became actively involved in the Danish Surrealist movement. Her paintings explored dreams, psychological symbolism, and mysterious transformations of familiar forms.

Her participation in the 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris established her presence within the European avant-garde. After fleeing German-occupied Denmark for Sweden in 1944, she began incorporating influences from the natural world, gradually moving away from figurative Surrealism. Her “Berget i natten (The Mountain at Night)” of 1946 illustrates this transition toward a softer, more poetic visual language.



Berget i natten (The Mountain at Night), c. 1946, oil on board. Estate of Elsa Thoresen and Vilhelm Bjerke-Petersen, courtesy of Alice Tompkins



Untitled , 1944,
oil on cloth, 81 x 65 cm

EVOLUTION OF ARTISTIC STYLE AND THEMES

Late Period (1947–1994) — Lyrical Abstraction and Nature

In the postwar years, Thoresen's artistic practice evolved toward abstraction and nature-inspired lyrical expression. Moving away from the recognizable figures and dreamlike narratives of her earlier Surrealist paintings, she increasingly emphasized organic forms, delicate brushwork, and atmospheric compositions.

Works such as “Untitled” (1970) and “Untitled” (1990) demonstrate Thoresen's continued exploration of abstraction and organic forms throughout her later career. Her later paintings illustrate her enduring interest in translating sensory impressions and subconscious experiences into abstract visual expressions, preserving the imaginative qualities of Surrealism while developing a distinctive artistic language.



Untitled, 1990, oil on canvas board, 50.8 x 40.5 cm



Untitled, 1970, oil on canvas, 45.8 x 35.5 cm

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Elsa Thoresen – Brinnande jord III (Burning Earth III)

Art Historical Context

Brinnande jord III (1946) represents a significant turning point in Elsa Thoresen's artistic development, reflecting her transition from figurative Surrealism toward organic abstraction. Created during her years in Sweden following her escape from German-occupied Denmark, the painting combines earthy tones, atmospheric blues, and biomorphic forms to evoke themes of destruction, transformation, and renewal. The work exemplifies her increasingly poetic interpretation of Surrealism, in which natural elements and subconscious imagery merge into mysterious, emotionally charged compositions.

Auction Result

Sold at Bukowskis in Stockholm on November 20, 2024, for SEK 2,400,000 hammer price (approximately USD 217,632, or USD 282,922 including a calculated 30% buyer's premium), significantly exceeding its pre-sale estimate of SEK 400,000–500,000.[1] Achieving 4.8 times the high estimate, the sale represents a major auction result for Thoresen and reflects growing market recognition of her contribution to Scandinavian Surrealism.

Provenance

The painting was formerly owned by Swedish industrialist Gösta Hägglund (1899–1993), who likely acquired it directly from an exhibition of Thoresen's work. In 1993, Hägglund gifted the painting to Brita Sandin, who subsequently gifted it to the auction consignor. This documented ownership history highlights the painting's preservation within private collections over several decades.

NOTABLE AUCTION RESULTS



"Brinnande jord III", 1946, oil on panel, 81 x 100.5 cm

[1] *Currency conversion is based on the historical exchange rate of 1 SEK = USD 0.09068 on November 20, 2024*

E. Thoresen.

Elsa Thoresen – Untitled (1938)

Art Historical Context

Untitled (1938) was created during a defining period in Elsa Thoresen's artistic career, when she was actively involved in the Scandinavian Surrealist movement. Painted in the same year she participated in the landmark International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris, the work belongs to a period of growing international recognition. Thoresen's artistic approach during these years combined abstraction with dreamlike imagery and psychological symbolism, reflecting her exploration of the unconscious and the imaginative possibilities of Surrealism. The painting, signed E.T. and dated 1938, is executed on canvas and measures 46 × 38 cm.

Auction Result

Sold at Bukowskis in Stockholm on May 18, 2022, for SEK 1,450,000 hammer price (approximately USD 145,567, or USD 189,237 including a calculated 30% buyer's premium), dramatically exceeding its pre-sale estimate of SEK 60,000–80,000.[2] Achieving more than 18 times its high estimate, the result marked a significant auction success for Thoresen and demonstrated strong collector interest in her early Surrealist works. The sale remains one of her most notable auction results, highlighting the growing market recognition of her contribution to Scandinavian modernism.

Exhibition History

The painting was exhibited in Nordiskt Avantgarde 1910–1960 at Per Ekström Museum in Mörbylånga, Sweden, from August 4 to September 15, 1996. The exhibition situated Thoresen's work within the broader development of Nordic avant-garde art, highlighting her place among the experimental artists who helped shape Scandinavian modernism during the twentieth century.

NOTABLE AUCTION RESULTS



"Untitled" 1938. oil on canvas, 46 x 38 cm

[2] *Currency conversions are based on the historical exchange rate of 1 SEK = USD 0.100391 on May 18, 2022*

E. Thoresen.

MARKET & COLLECTING



"Surreal landscape", 1943, oil on canvas, 87 x 85 cm

HOW COLLECTORS VIEW ELSA THORESEN'S WORKS

Characteristics Valued by Collectors

Collectors are drawn to Elsa Thoresen's distinctive interpretation of Surrealism, combining dreamlike imagery, organic abstraction, and poetic symbolism. Her paintings often feature mysterious landscapes, biomorphic forms, and subtle transformations inspired by nature and the subconscious. Unlike the provocative imagery associated with some Surrealists, Thoresen's work emphasizes atmosphere, imagination, and psychological depth. Her transition from figurative Surrealism toward lyrical abstraction further distinguishes her artistic practice, appealing to collectors interested in both Scandinavian modernism and the international avant-garde.

Position in the Nordic Modernist Market

Elsa Thoresen occupies an increasingly recognized position within Scandinavian Surrealism, particularly as museums and scholars reassess the contributions of historically overlooked women artists. Her works have appeared in major exhibitions, including Women's Surrealism (2018) and Fantastic Women at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art (2020), strengthening her institutional visibility.

From a market perspective, her auction results demonstrate growing collector interest. In 2024, Brinnande jord III (1946) achieved SEK 2,400,000 hammer price (approximately USD 217,632; USD 282,922 including a calculated 30% premium) at Bukowskis, while Untitled (1938) sold for SEK 1,450,000 hammer price (approximately USD 145,567; USD 189,237 including a calculated 30% premium) in 2022. Both results significantly exceeded their pre-sale estimates, highlighting strong competition for important examples of her work.

Appeal for New Collectors

Thoresen's work appeals to collectors seeking historically significant yet comparatively underrecognized figures within European Surrealism. Her participation in the 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris, combined with her distinctive artistic evolution, provides a compelling historical foundation. While major paintings have achieved substantial auction prices, smaller works and works on paper may offer more accessible entry points. As institutional interest in women Surrealists continues to develop, Thoresen represents an artist whose historical importance is receiving renewed attention, making her a compelling figure within the Scandinavian modernist collecting landscape.

E. Thoresen.

MUSEUM AND INSTITUTIONAL COLLECTIONS

SELECTED PAINTINGS · Museum Sønderjylland — Kunstmuseet i Tønder, Denmark



Klassisk landskab (Classical Landscape)

1937 · Oil on canvas · 78 × 53 cm

Museum Sønderjylland · Kunstmuseet i Tønder

SK 850



Objects of the Elements

1945 · Oil on cardboard · 55 × 46 cm

Museum Sønderjylland · Kunstmuseet i Tønder

SK 851



Skovens poesi (Poetry of the Forest)

1947 · Oil on fibreboard · 54 × 65 cm

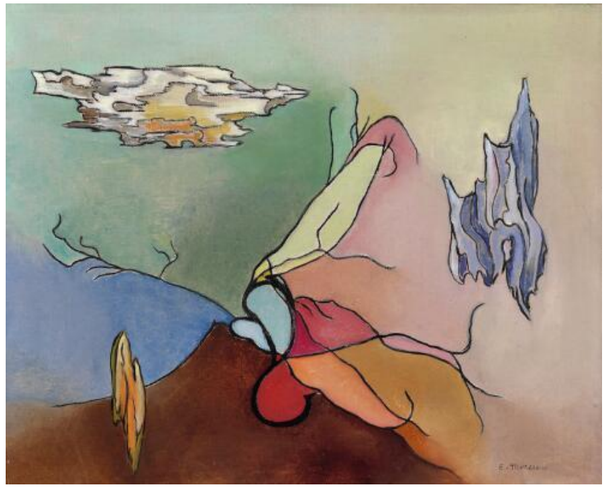
Museum Sønderjylland · Kunstmuseet i Tønder

SK 852

E. Thoresen.

MUSEUM AND INSTITUTIONAL COLLECTIONS

SELECTED PAINTINGS · Danish institutional collections



Surrealistisk landskab (Surrealist Landscape)

Undated · Oil on canvas · 33 × 41 cm

Fuglsang Kunstmuseum, Denmark

2021/21 · Acquired 2021



Uden titel (Untitled)

1944–1947 · Oil on paper mounted on Masonite
18.8 × 24 cm

ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Denmark

AAK M 1343 / Maleri 1343

E. Thoresen.

MUSEUM AND INSTITUTIONAL COLLECTIONS

SELECTED PAINTINGS · Norwegian institutional collections



Surrealistisk landskap (Surrealist Landscape)

1946 · Panel · 19 × 24 cm (auction record)

Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo, Norway

Acquired 2021



Terre brûlée (Scorched Earth)

1946 · Also known as Brændende Jord / Burning Earth

AKO Art Foundation · Tangen Collection
Administered by Kunstsilo, Kristiansand

Distinct from Brinnande jord III

E. Thorsen.

ADDITIONAL INSTITUTIONAL HOLDINGS

Prints and documented acquisitions

MUSEUM JORN · SILKEBORG, DENMARK

Untitled lithograph · 1950 · No. 1999/0103
Edition 17/21 · 27.8 × 30.3 cm

Untitled lithograph · 1950 · No. 1999/0104
Edition 7/21 · Image 24.5 × 19 cm

Untitled lithograph · 1950 · No. 1999/0105
Edition 7/25 · Image 19.2 × 21.5 cm

HALLANDS KONSTMUSEUM · HALMSTAD

The Stiftelsen Svea Larssons Donation 2023 report records four transferred artworks: one listed as Utan titel (Untitled), plus three works without published individual details.

Inventory scope: 14 publicly documented objects at seven collections; not a complete worldwide census.

E. Thoresen.

SELECTED SOURCES AND IMAGE CREDITS

Bibliography · institutional registers · auction documentation

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Martin, David F.

Objects of the Elements: The Art of Elsa Thoresen. Cascadia Art Museum, 2025.

Millroth, Thomas.

Good Luck Elsa Thoresen. Carlsson Bokförlag, Stockholm, 2024.

Breton, André, and Paul Éluard.

Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme (Abridged Dictionary of Surrealism). Paris, 1938.

Plastique, no. 3 (1938).

Journal associated with Sophie Taeuber-Arp; reproduction of Abstract Composition, p. 11.

Cascadia Art Museum.

Objects of the Elements: The Art of Elsa Thoresen, exhibition, 3 Dec 2025–8 Mar 2026.

PRIMARY RECORDS & DATA

Bukowskis, Stockholm.

Brinnande jord III (1946), auction 20 Nov 2024; Untitled (1938), auction 18 May 2022.

Danish museum collections register.

Museum Sønderjylland (SK 850–852), Fuglsang Kunstmuseum (2021/21), ARoS (AAK M 1343), Museum Jorn (1999/0103–0105).

Norwegian collection documentation.

Nasjonalmuseet 2021 acquisition; AKO Art Foundation / Tangen Collection, administered by Kunstsilo.

Hallands Konstmuseum.

Stiftelsen Svea Larssons Donation, 2023 report; four acquired works.

Historical SEK/USD conversions.

Figures on pp. 10–12 use historical exchange rates dated 20 Nov 2024 and 18 May 2022; the 30% premium is calculated, not verified as paid.

E. Thoresen.

IMAGE CREDITS - PAGES 001–006

Page-by-page register · artwork / illustration · supplied source or attribution

001 **Cover montage**

Elsa Thoresen artworks reproduced throughout this dossier; original image suppliers vary.

See individual artwork credits below; no separate montage photo credit supplied.

002 **Surrealistiskt landskap, 1937**

Oil on canvas, 69 × 59 cm.

Photographic source / rights holder not identified in supplied presentation.

003 **Composition, 1948**

Oil on canvas, 65 × 77 × 3 cm.

Photographic source / rights holder not identified in supplied presentation.

004 **Artist portrait and Strandens ansigt**

Elsa Thoresen in Oslo (1938): courtesy Alice Tompkins, Estate of Elsa Thoresen. Strandens ansigt (1939): private collection.

Image supplier for Strandens ansigt not specified.

005 **Abstract Composition, 1935**

AKO Art Foundation / Tangen Collection, administered by Kunstsilo, Kristiansand.

Collection attribution; image photographer not stated.

005 **Atmospheric Landscape, 1936**

Reproduced in Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme, 1938.

Original reproduction source / image rights still to confirm.

006 **Cascadia exhibition photograph**

Objects of the Elements: The Art of Elsa Thoresen (2025–26), Cascadia Art Museum.

Photographer and reproduction rights not stated in deck.

006 **Publication covers**

Good Luck Elsa Thoresen (Carlsson Bokförlag, 2024); Objects of the Elements (Cascadia Art Museum, 2025).

Publisher / museum identified; cover-image rights not independently confirmed.

E. Thoresen.

IMAGE CREDITS - PAGES 007–012

Page-by-page register · style evolution · auction records · market material

007 **Untitled, 1927**

Oil on canvas, 50 × 60 cm.

Photographic source not specified in deck.

007 **Abstract Composition, 1935**

AKO Art Foundation / Tangen Collection, administered by Kunstsilo.

Repeated image from p. 5; photographer not specified.

008 **Berget i natten, c. 1946**

Estate of Elsa Thoresen and Vilhelm Bjerke-Petersen; courtesy Alice Tompkins.

Attribution appears in the original slide caption.

008 **Untitled, 1944**

Oil on cloth, 81 × 65 cm.

Image source / rights holder not specified in deck.

009 **Untitled, 1990 / Untitled, 1970**

1990: oil on canvas board, 50.8 × 40.5 cm. 1970: oil on canvas, 45.8 × 35.5 cm.

Images supplied for dossier; photographer and copyright owner not identified.

010 **Brinnande jord III, 1946**

Auction photography / catalogue: Bukowskis, Stockholm, 20 Nov 2024.

Artwork and provenance described in Bukowskis sale record.

011 **Untitled, 1938**

Auction photography / catalogue: Bukowskis, Stockholm, 18 May 2022.

Artwork and exhibition documentation described in sale record.

012 **Surreal landscape, 1943**

Oil on canvas, 87 × 85 cm.

Photographic source / rights holder not specified in deck.

E. Thorresen.

IMAGE CREDITS - PAGES 013–021

Collection-based credits for the illustrated holdings · closing image

013 **Klassisk landskab, 1937**

Museum Sønderjylland — Kunstmuseet i Tønder, SK 850.

Digital collection record / image.

013 **Objects of the Elements, 1945**

Museum Sønderjylland — Kunstmuseet i Tønder, SK 851.

Digital collection record / image.

013 **Skovens poesi, 1947**

Museum Sønderjylland — Kunstmuseet i Tønder, SK 852.

Digital collection record / image.

014 **Surrealistisk landskab, undated**

Fuglsang Kunstmuseum, Denmark, inv. 2021/21.

Museum's digital collection register.

014 **Uden titel, 1944–1947**

ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Denmark, AAK M 1343 / Maleri 1343.

Current collection register; 2022 acquisition report dates it 1946.

015 **Surrealistisk landskap, 1946**

Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo; acquired 2021.

Work illustrated in official acquisitions record; image rights to confirm.

015 **Terre brûlée, 1946**

AKO Art Foundation / Tangen Collection, administered by Kunstsilo, Kristiansand.

Image supplier / reproduction licence not specified in deck.

021 **Tång, 1945**

Oil on canvas, 25 × 19 cm; closing illustration.

Photographic source / rights holder not specified in deck.



Tång, 1945, oil on canvas, 25 x 19 cm

E. Thorésen.