

BEYOND THE LIGHT

Identity and Place in Nineteenth-Century Danish Art

In the nineteenth century, the Kingdom of Denmark experienced great upheaval. Danes suffered through the Napoleonic Wars, the devastating bombardment of Copenhagen by the English, the loss of Norway as a partner state, war with Germany over its southern provinces, and national bankruptcy. During this period, the government transitioned from one of the oldest absolute monarchies in the world to a thriving constitutional democracy. These tumultuous circumstances gave rise to a vibrant cultural and philosophical environment in which artists and writers helped fashion the modern Danish nation.

Artists of the period, most of whom trained in drawing at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, tended to draw wherever they were: at home, outdoors, or when traveling. Forging a close-knit community, they created Denmark's first artistic school, which vacillated between realism (portraying an objective truth revealed by direct observation) and idealism (striving to depict an eternal truth that only the mind can apprehend).

The seeming tranquility portrayed in the drawings, oil sketches, and paintings in this exhibition belie the adversity of the times. These luminous scenes evoke notions of identity and belonging, of place, and of what it meant to travel and return home to Denmark.



Denmark in the nineteenth century

 Non-flash photography and video for personal use are welcome in the exhibition.

FOUNDERS OF A NATIONAL SCHOOL

As Denmark's borders diminished and traditional power structures eroded, the country's artists contemplated how best to portray themselves and their fellow citizens. In 1814 a new charter at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts was established, ushering in an era of reform in arts education that moved away from foreign influence and outdated training methods. The painter Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg, who was appointed professor at the Academy in 1818, became instrumental in changing the way Danish artists were taught. He encouraged his pupils to cultivate a devotion both to mathematical perspective and to drawing from nature. The tension between idealism and realism is strongly felt in portraits from this period in Denmark's history.

MONUMENTS ^{OF} A DANISH NATION

In the early nineteenth century, after recent economic disaster and political defeat, Denmark looked to restore the nation's psyche. The result was a rise in nationalism that brought increased interest in Danish history, customs, culture, and language. Artists sought out subjects that they regarded as distinctly Danish, including buildings, interiors, and the topography of Copenhagen, their capital city.

Denmark's first art historian, the ardent nationalist Niels Laurits Høyen, strongly believed that his country's identity was found in its distinctive landscape and material culture. Høyen taught at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, organized the Fine Arts Society, and transformed the Royal Collection into a state museum. Høyen embraced the movement to preserve Danish monuments as symbols of Denmark's heritage. In response, Danish artists for the first time began to draw and paint their country's palaces, churches, and military fortifications, sometimes for the Fine Arts Society's annual competitions, while also taking part in a larger national narrative for art collectors.

SEASCAPES AND LANDSCAPES

A coastal country of the North Atlantic, Denmark comprises a large peninsula and hundreds of islands whose myriad straits, fjords, bays, and inland waterways define the landscape and foster a sense of national identity. Given Denmark's proximity to the sea and the key role that maritime activity has played in the nation's long history, it is not surprising that nineteenth-century Danish artists explored their country's relationship to the water. The ever-changing sea became an important symbol of collective pride.

Landscapes in Denmark underwent rapid change in the 1800s owing to industrialization, agricultural expansion, and urban growth. Common pastures were divided up and plowed, and wetlands were drained. These large tracts, typically used to graze cattle, were once scattered with trees, boulders, and ancient burial monuments—from Stone Age dolmens (grave markers) to Bronze Age mounds. As these parts of the rural landscape were frequently removed to facilitate farming or to be used as building materials, many Danes worried they were witnessing the destruction of their homeland. They sought to understand the Danish past before traces of it were erased. Artists set out for the countryside to make precise observations of geological, topographical, and archaeological features.

TRAVEL PICTURES

The Royal Danish Academy, where most nineteenth-century Danish artists trained, considered a journey abroad integral to—and the ideal culmination of—an art education. These cultural and educational pilgrimages sometimes lasted several years. Italy was the prized destination, though a few artists ventured to Greece or Turkey. To finance their trips, the Academy bestowed travel funds from royal endowments in the form of stipends or scholarships, organizing annual competitions to determine the allocation. Such awards generally specified the cities, places, and sights that an artist should see. In addition to visiting museums, galleries, and studios, students were urged to examine the architectural ruins of ancient Rome, and many worked en plein air, or outdoors, sketching the surroundings.

The drawings and oil sketches in this gallery reflect the people, customs, architecture, and landscapes that the artists encountered on their travels. Though the works give the impression of being made on the spot, many are highly aestheticized views that were transformed in the studio, sometimes long after the artist had returned to Denmark.

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