Something Rotten in the Art of Denmark

by Theodore Dalrymple (February 2014)

Hankehøj by Johan Thomas Lundbye

Ever since I first encountered it, nearly fifty years ago, I have liked Danish painting of the Nineteenth Century, particularly of the first half commonly known as Danish art's *Golden Age*. As artistic golden ages go, and compared with, say, Spain or Holland's, Denmark's was modest. Købke was no Velasquez and Eckersberg was no Vermeer. But in the long run accomplished modesty seems to me better than failed ambition, which is much more frequently encountered in the history of art (though not as it is generally written, of course).

Danish romanticism in painting is to me much preferable to the German variety, even though (I suppose) everyone who takes an interest in the subject would agree that Caspar David Friederich was a greater painter than any of the Danes. It is strange that there should be so marked a difference in emotional tone between the artistic productions of two nations so geographically close. I have tried to put my finger on why I find Danish romanticism innocent and charming while I find its German equivalent chilling and sinister, ever more so as the nineteenth century progresses, culminating with the accomplished but to me odious and terrifying Böcklin. I think that the answer lies in that necessary but not sufficient quality in art, sincerity: the Danes feel, warmly and spontaneously, while the Germans *try*, often desperately like a constipated man trying to expel impacted faeces, to feel. And in so straining they give an impression precisely the opposite to the one they wish to give, namely that of heartlessness. Their vision is clear, but with a kind of cold-blooded reptilian clarity. They are like people who have heard of emotion but have never actually experienced any.

On my last trip to Copenhagen I actually bought a painting of the Golden Age. It was a very small picture, not more than ten inches by seven, by an unknown artist of a blond, blue-eyed, very sweet little boy in a sailor costume of the early nineteenth century, sitting in a boat with the Danish flag, the oldest and most beautiful of all national flags, fluttering behind him. The painting is saved from sentimentality by the evident and quite unmistakable love with which the boy is painted; if the artist were ever traced, one would not be surprised to

discover that the little boy was his son, in fact one would be rather surprised to discover that he wasn't. The picture hangs on the landing of my stairs, which I now never climb without looking at the little boy and feeling a certain pleasurable tenderness towards him, some kind of affirmation of life's goodness, though not unmixed with melancholy of the *memento mori* type: for the boy's innocence, his freshness, could not long have outlasted the painting of the picture, and life's difficulties and sorrows must soon have overtaken him. One of the reasons surely (*a* reason, note, not *the* reason) that Mankind has found it so necessary down the ages to depict the world in which he lives and moments of his life is to protect them both from the inevitable ravages of time, which is why:

> *… in the very temple of delight*
> *Veil'd melancholy keeps her sovereign shrine.*

The two reasons why I, no Maecenas, was able to buy the picture – its small size and the anonymity of its painter – were revealing of the workings of the art market. I remember the first time I had my pictures valued for insurance purposes; I was surprised and amused to see the valuer measure them with fanatical minuteness with his tape measure. So much for a square in for such and such a painter; a different quantity per square inch for another. He might as well have been weighing out butter or bacon, or valuing real estate in a fashionable part of an expensive city. As for anonymity, one might have thought that in a market such as that for art, aesthetics counted for all, but one would be mistaken: here is a world in which a rose definitely does not smell as sweet by any other name.

When I pass my little Danish sailor boy, I think that I do not really own him; I am but his temporary guardian until I pass him on, by sale or death, to another temporary guardian. He belongs not to me but to the world.

My interest in Danish painting is what one might call intermittent and dependent on chance rather than obsessional, let alone scholarly. I take the opportunity whenever it arises to see it, rather than seek it out. So when my brother and sister-in-law told me that they were visiting their daughter in Lille, where their daughter is a student, and where there happened to be at the time an exhibition of Danish art ('Of the Golden Age?' I asked at once) at a *La Piscine*, a municipal art gallery in a converted swimming pool, I took the opportunity.

In a certain sense the exhibition was a disappointment. Having several times visited the great collections in Copenhagen – the *Carlsberg Glypotek*, the *Statens Museum for Kunst* – I was expecting a selection of their best works, but I was mistaken. Instead there were more than a hundred pictures, many of them as small as my sailor boy, from the collection of an anonymous

Frenchman, comfortably off but not extremely rich, who, having become obsessed with Danish art of the Nineteenth Century, had assembled it in a matter of a few years. There were, it is true, a few minor works by the more famous names, such as Christoffer Eckersberg, Wilhelm Bendz and Jens Juel, but most of the artists represented were not famous, at least not outside Denmark, and there were even a few anonymous pictures (not by any means the least charming). Many did not rise above the level of mediocrity although, unlike the modern variety, such mediocrity was pleasant and on the side of beauty rather than offensive and on the side of ugliness. The artists might almost as well have been called artisans as artists; if they were professional, they were painting for a small and by no means rich market. The few lines of biography of one of them, Jens Erik Carl Rasmussen, who was represented by paintings of icebergs off Greenland (a Danish possession), was tantalising, one wanted to know more:

> *After training as a textile merchant, he studied at Royal Academy of Copenhagen (1862 – 1866)… Several journeys in Europe and to Greenland. Exhibited in Denmark and abroad. Rasmussen is principally known for his sea pictures and those of Greenland.*

His dates were given as Æroskøbing 1841 – disappeared in the Atlantic 1893. Tragedy was thus hinted at: shipwreck, starvation, suicide?

An exhibition of paintings of generally mediocre quality is not necessarily without value or interest, for all judgment is comparative and he who knows only the best of anything does not know it well. And, as I have already intimated, the authors of these works strove towards beauty even if they sometimes missed it. They were not to be despised.

At the price of one square inch of my painting from the Golden Age, I bought the exhibition catalogue. My instinct told me that I should, and my instinct was right, for the essays that it contained, particularly by an historian of art called Jonathan Lévy, raised important questions, at least questions that are important for me.

The majority of the pictures in the exhibition were landscapes. The Danish landscape is distinctly undramatic, like the Dutch; Nature there is not red in tooth and claw but thoroughly tamed and under Man’s control. Oddly enough, and for reasons that would be worth analysing, dramatic landscapes do not usually make for the best landscape paintings, which are generally of less startling views.

I had rather supposed that the peaceful landscapes of Denmark were both productive and indicative of an inner calm, so different from the German *Sturm und Drang*, but Jonathan Lévy, obviously better-acquainted with Nineteenth Century Denmark than I, suggests quite otherwise,

almost the opposite in fact.

The first half of the Nineteenth Century – its art's Golden Age – was an era of unmitigated political and economic disaster for Denmark. Agriculturally and commercially prosperous in the Eighteenth Century, Denmark suffered an uninterrupted series of catastrophes from about 1800 to 1864. First the British, fearing French domination of the country, bombarded Copenhagen and took control of its entire fleet; then Sweden, taking advantage of Denmark's weakness, waged a war and relieved it of control both of Southern Sweden and of Norway, its largest market. Then, from 1848 to the culminating war of 1864, Prussia wrested from it control of the duchies of Schleswig and Holdstein. From then on, Denmark was destined to play no important role in European history – a fate sad, perhaps, only for its political class.

According to Mr Lévy, however, these accumulated disasters caused Denmark increasingly to look inwards, to reject its previously outward-looking disposition. The calm and peaceful landscapes, far from being a manifestation of inner peace, were actually one of forced introspection and nationalistic pride in all that remained to Denmark, namely those very landscapes, so full of peasant (or what the Germans would call *volkisch*) virtue. A virtue was made of humiliating necessity, and a nationalist ideology, one of what one might call *Danitude*, grew up so that the artists of Denmark turned their back on developments elsewhere (particularly France) to concentrate on undramatic Danish meadows, woods and coastline. Here I ought to add that it is easy to appreciate one pleasant landscape painting of moderate artistic value, but it is more difficult to do so for twenty in succession. The succession undermines the virtue, and produces a kind of tedium which is unfair to the artist, who never wanted or expected his work to be exhibited in this fashion.

No artistic movement every goes entirely unopposed, and according to Mr Lévy (who is in a much better position to know than I) the inward-looking school of painters were opposed by an outward-looking school, supported by the work of Denmark's greatest literary critic, Georg Brandes. Now Brandes, though Danish by birth, was of Sephardic Jewish descent, and was therefore suspect in the eyes of nationalists and xenophobes (the latter having been much stimulated by their country's recent experience with foreign countries). Danish painters were thus divided into two categories, the blonds and the browns. The former were the nationalists and the latter the internationalists; the name referred to the colour of their hair, the implication being that the more pure ethnic Danish, those who contented themselves with Danish meadows and peasant scenes, were blond-haired, whereas the foreign element were brown-haired. On this view, my little sailor boy might personally be innocent, but the reason for painting him in the first place was not, at least when viewed through the retrospectoscope of European history. On this reading, or in this perspective, even the depiction of the Danish fields and

the woods, seemingly so tranquil and so redolent of quiet and unambitious contentment, takes on an unsuspectedly sinister aspect.

But is this right? Is it even reasonable? Does it tell us more about our own obsessions than about Danish painting of a century and a half ago? I open the catalogue at random and I see Frederik Niels Martin Rodhde's painting, *Landscape of the Danish countryside with a man in a boat transporting reeds, talking to a woman sitting on the bank*. Here is a rural idyll. The sky is blue but there are clouds so that it cannot be too hot. A flight of birds wings its way towards us. The land is flat, but not so flat that it bores the eye or implies a disquieting limitlessness; in the far distance, much too far to imply that this is a theocracy, is a church, so that the land is neither overcrowded nor unpeopled.

Can this really bear the weight of interpretation put upon it? Does art not have claims that are independent of the social, historical and economic circumstances in which it was created? I look at the picture again and see only a very pleasant landscape. And yet the art historian's words return to my mind, like a banal tune that won't leave one's brain however much one wants it to.

The anonymous collector wrote a chapter in the catalogue as well. He describes how he started: 'One day, I took the leap… and bought a first painting, delivered a few days later by post.' That is just how my little sailor boy arrived.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is *here*.