The Danish Golden Age
and the Nationalmuseum

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Fig. 1 Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (1783–1853), *The Monastery of St Maria in Araceli*, 1815. Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 cm. Nationalmuseum, NM 1928.
Awareness of the greatness of Danish art from the first half of the 19th century came remarkably late in Sweden. Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg, it is true, had a number of Swedish pupils, and many of his Danish followers travelled to Sweden in search of picturesque subjects, but none of this sparked any appreciable interest in that country in the art of its neighbour. Nor did the rapid rise of Scandinavianism have any impact in that respect.¹ Credit for first drawing attention to Danish art from the period 1800–1850 must go to the artist and Nationalmuseum director Richard Bergh,² who numbered several Danish artists among his friends. Prince Eugen would also be of some significance, as would a close friend of his, Helena Nyblom, the daughter of Jørgen Roed.³ As soon as Bergh became director, he set to work strengthening the Museum’s collections in this area. The year he was appointed, 1915, several Danish paintings were acquired, among them an Italian Woman in National Costume by Wilhelm Marstrand (NM 1840), to be joined the following year by Eckersberg’s The Monastery of St Maria in Aracoeli (Fig. 1), a gift from the Friends of the Nationalmuseum. With virtually no Danish art from the period in the Museum’s collections at that point, Bergh first wanted to generate interest by putting on exhibitions. He persuaded his friend, the insurance magnate and art collector Wilhelm Hansen at Ordrupgaard, to lend his collection, and in spring 1918 it was shown at the Nationalmuseum. A new exhibition quickly followed in the autumn of the same year, now of Danish drawings, put together by the leading authority, Karl Madsen, director of the National Gallery

Fig. 2 Jørgen Roed (1808–1888), From Collin’s Garden in Copenhagen, 1833. Oil on cardboard mounted on panel, 33 x 25 cm. Nationalmuseum, NM 2394.

Fig. 4 Albert Küchler (1803–1886), Woman with a Slouch Hat in her Lap. Pencil on paper, 36 x 28 cm. Nationalmuseum, NMH 921/1924. A preliminary study for Roman Peasants Buying a Hat for Their Little Son, who is to be an Abbate.
of Denmark (Statens Museum for Kunst). As a result of these efforts, a number of landscape paintings by Peter Christian Skovgaard and Wilhelm Kyhn could be added to the Nationalmuseum collections. Much of this was a consequence of Richard Bergh’s many contacts, not least a gift from Danish friends on his 60th birthday in 1919. Following Bergh’s death the same year, it was left to the Swedish Association for Art (Sveriges Allmänna Konstförening) to give effect to his plans for an exhibition of Danish art from the first half of the 19th century, which was held at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm in 1922. This display was the first significant one mounted outside Denmark, but there would in fact be only one sequel to it, at the Jeu de Paume in Paris in 1928, organised by Karl Madsen.

Despite Bergh’s sudden death, the Nationalmuseum continued along the path already staked out as far as acquisitions were concerned. In its 1924 yearbook, Axel Gauffin, who at the time was head of the paintings department, proudly announced that the Museum had recently made a successful bid for Jørgen Roed’s From Collin’s Garden in Copenhagen (Fig. 2) at the sale of Consul General Valdemar Glückstadt’s collection. The fact that the painting was already highly prized among Danish art historians added to Gauffin’s satisfaction. He considered the new addition particularly gratifying in view of the difficulties the Museum had had getting hold of Danish paintings from the period. He was pessimistic, though, about its chances of acquiring major works, as in his view these were already in Danish public collections, at the same time as those collections continued to grow. According to Gauffin, private collecting of national art was also widespread in Denmark, adding to the competition. There is a sharp edge to his claim that “at present it is businessmen in the food industry who are earning money and consequently buying art in Copenhagen”.

The comment can be traced back to a Danish newspaper report on the Glückstadt sale, highlighting how “both Wholesaler Theodor Jensen and Engineer Rump sought to offer the Swedes as much resistance as possible”. The article concluded on a good-natured note, however, congratulating the Nationalmuseum on its acquisition and observing that Roed’s painting would “represent the Danish Golden Age in the best possible way in Stockholm”.

Despite this resistance, the Museum managed to make a number of significant acquisitions in the early 1920s of artists such as Ekkersberg, Jensen, Købke and Marstrand. An Italian landscape painted by Marstrand was bought from Jørgen Roed’s grandson Holger Nyblom (Fig. 3). Another Swedish source can be identified for important drawings by the great...
Danish artists in Italy, namely Axel Palm, son of the painter Gustaf Wilhelm Palm. In 1924 he presented the Nationalmuseum with several significant works by, among others, Albert Küchler (Figs. 4 and 5).  

The Museum’s single-minded ambition, reflected not least in much courting of Richard Bergh’s friend Wilhelm Hansen, eventually resulted in two magnificent gifts to the Nationalmuseum, comprising 22 paintings in all, to mark the 70th and 75th birthdays of King Gustaf V in 1928 and 1933. The latter year, moreover, the Friends of the Museum donated a significant quantity of drawings, most of them from the collections of the Danish Art Society (Kunstforeningen). Over the rest of the 1930s, further works were regularly acquired, albeit not in large numbers. A driving force here was the Museum’s long-serving director, Axel Gauffin, who had a passionate interest in the Danish Golden Age.

During and immediately after the war, no purchases of Danish art were made. Not until the early 1950s did acquisitions in this area gather fresh momentum. There was now a clear goal, a major exhibition at the Nationalmuseum in close collaboration with colleagues from Denmark. Titled The Danish Golden Age, it opened in 1964. This was without doubt the first extensive survey of this great era of Danish art. Not until 1977 was there another, at the Palazzo Braschi in Rome, and it would be another seven years before the National Gallery in London mounted a corresponding project. This would be Kasper Monrad’s first major international presentation of Danish Golden Age art, but by no means his last.

The concept of a “Danish Golden Age” was not invented in Stockholm. It had been used as early as 1924, in the newspaper article quoted earlier. Originally, the conventional terms had been the “Copenhagen School” or “Eckersberg and his School”, but in the 1940s the expression “Golden Age”, borrowed from the history of literature, appeared increasingly frequently. It is probably reasonable to
claim, though, that the idea of a Danish Golden Age was put firmly on the map by the Nationalmuseum’s exhibition in 1964.

That exhibition resulted the following year (1965) in a combined gift and purchase of drawings by Jørgen Roed, originating from his great-grandson, the architect Bengt Lundberg. Comprising over 100 items, it included, not least, a series of figure studies by Roed from his student years in Italy and later in Denmark. This treasure trove of Danish Golden Age drawings first attracted notice in Jens Peter Munk’s Jørgen Roed: ungdomsarbejder (Jørgen Roed: Youthful Works), in 2013. From this we understand that, despite the Museum’s ambitious exhibition and the large addition of drawings by Roed, other results in terms of acquisitions were modest. In 1969 two portraits by Roed were bought, NM 6230–6231 (Fig. 6), but not until 2004 would any further Golden Age painting be acquired, with the purchase of Martinus Rørbye’s portrait of his mother Frederikke Eleonora Cathrine Rørbye. How is this gap of almost 40 years without active acquisitions to be explained? In the Museum’s catalogue of Nordic paintings, from 1995, there is quite a sharp pronouncement, somewhat reminiscent of Axel Gauffin’s 70 years earlier: “The acquisition of works by the great ‘Golden Age’ painters was made difficult by a growth of Danish vigilance whenever important works by them ... happened to come under the hammer.”

Certainly, until just a few decades ago, the art market was hampered by a more protectionist approach to cultural heritage, so too in Sweden, often with the effect of “locking in” the national art of a country. In the Nationalmuseum’s case, there was also a dearth of purchase grants and funds earmarked for Danish art. Nevertheless, the question remains why for so many years nothing was done, not least in view of the important role originally played by the Friends of the Museum. The simple answer is that there were other priorities.

In 2014, however, a new, active acquisitions campaign was launched which, in

Fig. 8 Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (1783–1853), “Una Ciociara”– Portrait of a Roman Country Girl. Oil on canvas, 52 x 46.5 cm. Purchase: The Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7334.

Fig. 9 Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (1783–1853), Frederick VI of Denmark (1768–1839), 1820. Oil on canvas, 46 x 37 cm. Purchase: Magda and Max Ettler Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7324.
just over two years, has doubled the Nationalmuseum’s collection of Danish Golden Age paintings, from 40 to 80 works. This would not have been possible without substantial donations from private individuals. The first work to be acquired was Constantin Hansen’s fine little view of San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome (NM 7143), from 1856. This was the result of a bequest by the pharmacist Ulla Bella Sandberg, who left her entire estate to the Museum. Of the 30 or so acquisitions over the past year, the majority were purchased with moneys from the Wiros Fund. The aim, now as in previous years, has been to add works by artists who are either already represented in or entirely absent from the collection. Particular mention may be made of a set of five paintings and a drawing by the founding father, Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg, all of them highlighting different facets of his art. His youthful work Oedipus and Antigone (Fig. 7) was painted in 1812, during his time as a student of Jacques-Louis David, to whom it owes its subject matter, while its figure drawing reflects the continuing influence of fellow Dane Nikolai Abildgaard. Four years later he produced his rendering of a Roman country girl, Una Ciociara (Fig. 8). This painting has a monumentality that reveals Eckersberg’s careful study of Raphael and his La Fornarina, which was the height of fashion at the time. The artist’s diary also makes it clear that he went about his task very methodically, hiring the costume and accessories for two weeks. This was hardly an authentic Roman woman Eckersberg had happened upon in the street, in other words, but a carefully staged, genre-like portrait. The painting clearly meant a great deal to Eckersberg, who kept it and used it as an object of study for his pupils.

Following his return to Copenhagen, Eckersberg quickly established himself as the leading name in Danish art, resulting in official commissions from Frederick VI. At the end of 1819, he painted his famous profile portrait of the king, which was later
repeated in a large group portrait of the entire royal family, as well as being copied by many of his students. The Museum has been able to acquire one of the first versions (Fig. 9), which Frederick VI gave to José Maria O’Neill, an Irish merchant and Danish consul general in Lisbon, and which subsequently passed by inheritance to his descendants.18 Portraits, which provided a reliable income, were to make up a not insignificant share of Eckersberg’s output. Among the more original examples is his representation of the 22-year-old Karen Margrethe Borch (Fig. 10). It was commissioned by her father, the wealthy art collector Rasmus Borch, who was a friend of Eckersberg’s and often visited him.19 This portrait is special in several respects. For one thing the sitter is shown almost full-length, and for another she is surrounded by an illusionistic painted frame. There is another work by Eckersberg with this feature, a nude study (now in the Louvre), which he also sold to Borch.20 Clearly this was something the client had requested, as painted frames are not found in any of the artist’s other works.

Eckersberg was to revitalise training at the Danish Academy of Fine Arts by opening the way for nude studies of female models, which had not previously been permitted there. Through his private summer courses, he gradually managed to undermine resistance to the idea. The model study which the Nationalmuseum...
acquired during the year shows a woman combing her hair by a bed (Fig. 11). This is probably Florentine, who was employed as a model in the summers of 1840 and 1841. Eckersberg’s nude study is interesting in that, for the first time, it shows a model in an everyday setting, rather than, as before, posing like an ancient sculpture.

The Nationalmuseum, finally, has been able to acquire one of Eckersberg’s most important drawings, an interior from his home at Charlottenborg (Fig. 12). In this wash drawing, the artist depicts in perspective, in his characteristic fashion, a sequence of three rooms in his apartment. Hanging on the walls are paintings in various stages of completion. One is on the floor and some are unframed. To the right on the wall of the far room hangs a picture that appears to be identical to The Cloisters, San Lorenzo fuori le Mura (now in the Art Institute of Chicago). Eckersberg painted it in 1824 and it was sold the same year, suggesting that the drawing, too, can be dated to this time.

One of Eckersberg’s closest students was Constantin Hansen (1804–80). For a long time, he was represented in the collection by a single portrait of his sister Alvilde (NM 3308), which in 2013 could be supplemented with the earlier-mentioned Roman view. Gratifyingly, the Museum now has another two works that serve to enrich our understanding of Hansen as an artist. One is a view of the Temple of Minerva on the Forum of Nerva in Rome, c. 1840. Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 35 x 27.5 cm. Purchase: The Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7339.

Thorald Læssøe is nowadays one of the overlooked painters of the Danish Golden Age. His magnificent View Towards the Forum Romanum from the Colosseum was given to the Museum as early as 1940, by
Mr Axel Stangenberg. This large-format painting, originally part of the collection of Christian VIII of Denmark, is based on sketches Læssøe did on the spot. One of these was recently acquired by the Museum: a view of the cella of the Temple of Venus and Roma (NM 7364).24

The First Schleswig War, from 1848 to 1851, drove a wedge between the painters of the Golden Age. As a result of the conflict, several of the German speakers among them, born in the Danish king’s north German duchy, distanced themselves from their former Danish friends. Louis Gurlitt (1812–97), born in Altona and a pupil of Eckersberg’s, was regarded early on as one of the creators of the Danish national landscape in painting. He was elected a member of the Copenhagen Academy in 1840, but because of his stance in the war his landscapes were removed from display in the Royal Picture Gallery (now the National Gallery of Denmark).25 Gurlitt, despite his early prominence, was thus for a long time persona non grata in Danish art history. However, the exhibition Under the Same Sky at the Thorvaldsen Museum in 2000, in particular, prompted a reappraisal of his contribution to Danish Golden Age painting. By a fortunate coincidence, an early self-portrait, painted by Gurlitt in Copenhagen in 1833, could be bought at a sale in Paris in 2016 (Fig. 15).26 Earlier in the year, on the Copenhagen art market, the Nationalmuseum had acquired a version of one of Gurlitt’s better-known motifs, a View of Marina Piccola on Capri (Fig. 16), executed around 1844.27 The location, incidentally, is the same as Christen Købke chose for a painting which he did two years later, but which

Fig. 16 Louis Gurlitt (1812–1897), View of Marina Piccola on Capri, c. 1844. Oil on panel, 48 x 70.1 cm. Purchase: The Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7322.
Before it was loosened by EU-wide legislation, cannot be disregarded of course, but at the same time there has always been a good supply of important works. Leaving aside a few individual paintings, primarily by Eckersberg, which have soared to international heights after determined Danish efforts to influence the leading art museums of Europe and America, price levels have if anything fallen in real terms over the last 25 years. This trend has benefited the Nationalmuseum’s recent campaign to acquire works from Denmark’s Golden Age, an endeavour that will culminate in a major exhibition project.

The Liner Skjold in Christianshavn Dock (Fig. 18), painted in 1860 and recently bought by the Museum, we see many reminiscences of Eckersberg’s painting. It can be compared, for example, with the latter’s A Corvette on the Stocks, from as late as 1851. The light and the down-to-earth description of the shipyard setting are still firmly in the tradition of the Golden Age.

Looking back over the past 100 years, we see that Axel Gauffin’s defeatist analysis cast a long shadow over attempts to build up a collection of Danish Golden Age painting at the Nationalmuseum. The protectionism which for a long time placed a straitjacket on the art market, before it was loosened by EU-wide legislation, cannot be disregarded of course, but at the same time there has always been a good supply of important works. Leaving aside a few individual paintings, primarily by Eckersberg, which have soared to international heights after determined Danish efforts to influence the leading art museums of Europe and America, price levels have if anything fallen in real terms over the last 25 years. This trend has benefited the Nationalmuseum’s recent campaign to acquire works from Denmark’s Golden Age, an endeavour that will culminate in a major exhibition project.

Otto Bache (1839–1927) became a pupil at the Danish Academy of Fine Arts at the age of just 11. Eckersberg was still alive, but 1850 has long been regarded as a point at which Golden Age painting was already at an end. Although Bache was taught by Wilhelm Marstrand, in

Fig. 17 Christen Købke (1810–1848), Young Capri Boy, c. 1839. Oil on canvas mounted on cardboard, 51 x 26 cm. Purchase: The Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7316.

Fig. 15 Louis Gurlitt (1812–1897), Self-Portrait, 1833. Oil on canvas, 24.5 x 18 cm. Purchase: The Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7375.
Notes:

1. It should be mentioned, though, that a major exhibition of Nordic art marking the opening of the Nationalmuseum in 1866 did include late works by Peter Christian Skovgaard. However, these cannot be regarded as examples of Golden Age painting proper. Cf. Tomas Björk, “P. C. Skovgaard i et nordisk lys”, in P. C. Skovgaard: Dansk guldalder revurderet, Gertrud Oelsner & Karina Lykke Grand (eds.), Aarhus 2010, pp. 195–216.


4. Ibid.


Fig. 18 Otto Bache (1839–1927), The Liner Skibl in Christianshavn Dock, Oil on canvas, 36.2 x 40.5 cm. Purchase: The Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7562.
7. Ibid., p. 2.
8. Nationalmuseum Archives, Paintings Inventory NM 2394, pasted-in newspaper article: “Glückstadt-Auktionen: Stockholms Nationalmuseum köpte Roeds Vinterbillede for 5750 Kr.”
10. On retiring from the post in the autumn of 1944, Gauffin gave a series of five lectures at the Museum on the great artists of Denmark’s Golden Age. He revealed, among other things, that he regretted never having managed, during his years as director, to acquire a significant landscape by J. T. Lundbye (Konstvärdelen, 1942, p. 643).
17. Wilhelm Bendz was among those who produced a copy of Una Ciociara, to be found in the famous interior from Amaliegade, 1826 (Hirschsprung Collection). Eckersberg’s original was sold in his estate sale on 17 April 1854 (lot 26) and eventually ended up in the Claudius Collection in Malmö. In 1997 it was sold at Museumsbygningen in Copenhagen (4 September 1997, lot 158) and acquired by an American collector. Bought by the Nationalmuseum at Christie’s, New York, 19th Century European Art, 25 April 2016, lot 67.
22. My thanks to curator Carl-Johan Olsson for this keen observation.
27. Cf. ibid., p. 69, cat. no. 50.