Drømmebilleder. Carl Gustaf Pilos portrætkunst

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In the eighteenth century, the study of the great masters was considered an indispensable part of an artist’s education. Had they searched for a specific artist to illustrate this tenet, the theorists of the day could hardly have found a better example than Carl Gustaf Pilo (1711–1793), a Swedish artist who became a successful portrait painter in the service of the Danish court and aristocracy. The pattern of Pilo’s artistic development and the ups and downs of his career are also an unusually clear demonstration of how much the arts were part of the politics and power struggles of the time. Pilo’s life and times are vividly described and analysed in Charlotte Christensen’s beautifully illustrated book Drømmebilleder (Dream Images), the first monograph on the artist to appear in over a century.

Very few documents by Pilo’s own hand survive, and none of these concerns his work as an artist. Apart from a few drawings, made towards the end of his life, we find practically no traces of his personal life in his art – with the exception of a small portrait of his wife (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm). The most important source for Pilo’s life and career remains the memorial written after his death by the Secretary of the Swedish Royal Academy of Art, Thure Wennberg (1759–1818), and published in 1794. Wennberg knew Pilo, and his text is presumably to a large extent based on information from the ageing artist, though it is far from a complete biography and remains unclear on several points. Charlotte Christensen returns to Wennberg’s memorial throughout her book, using it as a structural core for her discussion of the artist’s life and career. The author then situates Pilo’s achievements in a wide historical, art historical and theoretical context. Starting with the career of Pilo’s father, Olof Pilo (1668–1753) had worked as a decorative painter at court, but was not able to find work during the hard times of the early eighteenth century, and instead turned to farming. After receiving his first training from his father, Carl Gustaf Pilo was taken on as an apprentice by the master painter Christopher Christman the elder (d. 1727) in 1723. Christenson shows that he was still in the Christman household in 1730, and he
must thus also have been taught by the younger Christman (d. 1743), who took over his father’s workshop. Whether Wennberg refers to the elder or the younger Christman (whose name he gives as Celsman) in the above-mentioned memorial is unclear, but in either case, his claim that Pilo’s master had the most highly respected artist’s workshop in Stockholm at the time is hardly accurate. Pilo became a journeyman in 1731. His father had evidently not managed to maintain any contacts he may have had that might have helped his son in his early career, and the young artist was not able to find sufficient work or attract influential patronage on his own. This did not only mean lack of income and career opportunities, but also that he did not have access to works of sufficient quality to study in order to develop his art. Wennberg assumes that he attended the newly established Drawing Academy at the Royal Palace, but Christensen demonstrates that this is very unlikely. In 1738, when after a few obscure years Pilo turned up in Scania, he had begun to work as a portrait painter, and a drawing signed this year shows that he had already begun to master his metier. By then he had found influential patrons, but left for Denmark as the result of a broken promise of marriage. Through his future wife Charlotte Desmarées he gained the position of drawing teacher at the Landkadetakademiet (army cadet school), where he received the attention of the first of several important Danish patrons. In 1744, he became a free-mason, confirming that in only a few years, he had gained a position in Danish society. The following year he was given a post as Court Painter, and in 1748 was named professor at the Royal Danish Academy of Art.

Pilo’s early years in Denmark coincided with major undertakings in the arts and with extensive Royal and private art collecting as well as acquisitions of contemporary French decorative art, including 130 paintings for the palace of Christiansborg – and Pilo took advantage of the situation. He never made a European study tour, but now contemporary and earlier work of important artists from several countries became available to him. With access to collections, and with the presence of foreign and internationally active Danish painters in Copenhagen, Pilo now became part of an international art scene. It is evident that he strove to keep up with developments on the continent. A concrete instance of this is his attempts at wax painting, a technique mentioned by Pliny the younger that was revived by French theorists and artists at the time. As a professor at the Academy, he was also obliged to become more closely acquainted with history painting; in a sense, while teaching his students, he also taught himself. In this context, Christensen identifies specific examples of how acquisitions for the Royal collections spurred Pilo to new ventures. As a result of this admirable effort at self-instruction, Pilo rapidly developed into a virtuoso portrait painter, merging his studies into a very individual style and technique, which was especially exuberant during the 1750s.

During the reign of Frederik V, Pilo was Denmark’s leading portrait painter, and his home in the palace of Christiansborg testified to collecting interests and a modest wealth. Besides the execution of numerous portraits of the Royal family, he was also responsible for the Danish royal collections and for restoration work, tasks he shared with the other court painters. His commissions from private patrons also varied, including overseeing work on Count Moltke’s palace in Copenhagen, for which he did decorative paintings,
including a pair of wonderfully vivid paintings of birds and flowers on glass that are still in place. Pilo’s achievements did not go unnoticed in Sweden – when Gustav III instituted the order of Vasa, Pilo was among the first recipients. The artist’s fall from this established position was dramatic – intrigues, international politics, changing fashions in art and a rising Danish nationalism led to a series of events that ended in his expulsion. Back in Sweden, he was at first again unable to find work or patronage, but eventually found himself professor at the Swedish Royal Academy of Arts, part of a friendly circle of artists at Gustav III’s court, and entrusted with perhaps the most prestigious commission of his career – a huge depiction of the King’s coronation.

While the outlines of Pilo’s life are clear, several points remain uncertain, and the same can be said for his development and practices as an artist. Preliminary drawings and sketches are very rare, and no documentation of the working process in his studio exists, though the names of several of his assistants are known. While the broad outline of his development in style and technique can be discerned through an analysis of his work, few of Pilo’s paintings are dated, and some attributions from his early years in Denmark are still uncertain. Among Christensen’s reattributions to Pilo is a portrait of an oculist (Russian State Museum, St Petersburg), hitherto given to Francesco Fontebasso; also, she convincingly identifies the sitter as Chevalier John Taylor, eye specialist and supreme self-advertiser, who arrived in Denmark in 1751 and left for Russia in the following year.

Even in photographs, Pilo’s extraordinarily vivid brushwork – especially in the works from the 1750s – still comes across as breathtaking. Not least among the qualities of Drømmebilleder is the author’s close attention to, and understanding of the paintings as physical objects. She evocatively describes how the original (surviving intact in only a few instances) texture of Pilo’s paintings would have interplayed with the effects of changing daylight or flickering candlelight, and reflections from mirrors, gilding and shimmering fabrics. The technique was chosen in anticipation of such effects, and part of the success of Pilo, and any other portrait painter of the time, depended on producing paintings that were not only satisfactory in themselves, but also functioned within an interior – if not a specific room, then almost always for a particular kind of room. Pilo’s brushwork is defined as decorative, not illusory, and thus in itself part of the ornamental elements of the interior where the painting was displayed. It is easy to agree with Christensen, that Pilo’s handling of the colours, both as shades and as a three-dimensional material, and his joy in the painting process, is what makes his otherwise often conventional portraits so characteristic. The technique was also instrumental in bringing about the dreamlike quality to which the title of the book refers. This is especially evident in his paintings of royalty, and Christensen pays particular attention to the artist’s portraits of Frederik V and his consort Louise (versions, e.g. in Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, and Valdemars slot), and his much later, unfinished painting of the Coronation of Gustav III. These images do not aim to depict reality, but transfer the subjects and occasions to another sphere, outside of time and place.

The Coronation is one of the many images Gustav III commissioned to document his reign. It is interesting to compare Pilo’s huge canvas (293 × 531 cm) to Elias Martin’s (1730–1818) depiction of the christening of Gustav III’s younger son, the Duke of
Småland (223 × 195 cm, both Nationalmuseum, Stockholm). The two artists and friends worked simultaneously on these paintings, and they both used lighting effects to give an otherworldly aspect to royal ceremonies and the church interiors in which they took place. For Pilo’s painting, Christensen convincingly argues an influence from Jürgen Oven’s paintings of the marriage of Karl X Gustav and Hedvig Eleonora, dating from the 1660s (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm), as well as his studies of Rembrandt’s art, which began to have an impact on his painting from the 1760s.

Despite a few mistakes concerning Swedish history, the wide scope of Drømmebilleder means that it can also be read as an engaging introduction to many aspects of the cultural history of eighteenth-century Scandinavia. It is especially interesting to note the many similarities of the building projects, patronage and collecting of the court and élite of Copenhagen and Stockholm. Influences and competition within the arts between the old arch-enemies Denmark and Sweden – including the taking of war booty in the previous century – was a longstanding phenomenon, but its continuation and development in the eighteenth century deserve further study.

Pilo’s joy in painting is reflected in Charlotte Christensen’s writing; her biography of the artist is an enthusiastic labour of love, of Pilo, of the Danish eighteenth century, and of the painter’s craft. Drømmebilleder is thus not only instructive, but great a pleasure to read.

**Note**


Silja Rantanen is one of the most eminent Finnish artists of her generation, recognized for her conceptual paintings based on structural patterns and architectural elements. She has also greatly affected both the Swedish and Finnish art scene as Acting Professor at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm in the mid-1990s and Professor in painting at the Academy in Fine Arts/University of the Arts in Helsinki (2010–Present). Parallel to the professorship, she also enrolled in the Doctoral Studies Programme at the Academy in Fine Arts, which resulted in the doctoral thesis Out of the Brackets. Genre as Compositional Pattern in Contemporary Art (Helsinki 2014).

Rantanen’s thesis is unique in the field of artistic research in Finland, since it consists exclusively of a theoretical monograph – with no involvement of artistic practice per se. On the other hand, it is obvious that her vast experience as a practising artist has informed not only her interpretations of singular works of art but also her theoretical stance and her field of interest.

The thesis consists of three parts: “Compositional patterns derived from modern art”, “Compositional patterns shared by various artists”, and “Compositional patterns seeking