Studies in Reverie

Danish paintings from the collection of Ambassador John L. Loeb Jr. will be the subject of a major ASF exhibition starting in October.

By Kerry Greaves

The international appeal of 19th- and early 20th-century Danish art has increased considerably over the last 30 years. In this country, the thirst for Danish art was established by a number of important museum exhibitions during the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the efforts of one visionary collector, Ambassador John L. Loeb Jr. More recently, there has been a flourishing of interest in Scandinavian culture. The Scandinavian art scene was the theme of the 2012 Armory Show, and the Kennedy Center’s 2013 international festival “Nordic Cool” highlighted current artists and designers from the region, while The American-Scandinavian Foundation’s salient 2012 exhibition “Luminous Modernism” showcased the pioneering legacy of progressive Scandinavian modernists. Rather frustratingly, however, despite the growing popularity of Danish art there is still little opportunity to view

Self-Portrait, the Artist’s Last Work, 1910, by Julius Exner (1825-1910). Oil on canvas, c. 26 x 23 ½".
it outside of Scandinavia. It is therefore both fortuitous and significant that The American-Scandinavian Foundation has chosen to highlight selections from Ambassador Loeb’s collection in its current exhibition “From the Golden Age to the Modern Breakthrough: Danish Paintings from the Collection of Ambassador John L. Loeb Jr.,” co-curated by Dr. Patricia G. Berman, Professor of Art at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, and Thor J. Mednick, Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Toledo, Ohio. It is on view from October 12 through January 18, 2014. This concise yet outstanding excerpt from the most important private collection of Danish art outside of Scandinavia presents a rare opportunity to encounter beloved masterworks alongside those by less well-known artists.

Ambassador Loeb became captivated by and began purchasing Danish art from the 18th through the early 20th centuries while serving as United States Ambassador to Denmark from 1981 to 1983, during a time when such art was far less popular than its French and German counterparts. The Loeb collection, which consists of an astounding 128 works by 63 artists spanning more than 200 years, has consistently stimulated interest in and transformed the reception of Danish art internationally through generous exhibition loans, scholarly research and related publications. The ASF exhibition will reflect a very personal selection of paintings chosen by Ambassador Loeb in consultation with Dr. Berman. While the current exhibition is the result of this personal visions, the selection is encyclopedic in breadth, and the conversations that the works elicit from one another give rise to several underlying themes. The interplay between national and international, and public and private, the role of artistic pedagogy and the emergence of women as both subject matter and professional artist all emerge as motifs that have engaged Danish artists over the last two centuries.

“From the Golden Age to the Modern Breakthrough” reflects well the multilayered meanings circumscribed by Danish art of the period, which often seems both familiar and eccentric to viewers outside of Scandinavia. While we might recognize the enigmatic symbolism of a Hammershoi interior or the impressionist flourishes in a Krøyer beach scene, it can be difficult to precisely place what location is being depicted or where the artist is from. Danish art has benefitted from its stylistic affinities with French and German art of the 19th and early 20th centuries in making it readable to an international audience, but its uniquely local aspects have often rendered it somewhat
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Obscure to anyone outside of Scandinavia. Yet it is precisely Danish art’s capacity to engage often divergent influences and themes that makes it unique in the history of art and so powerful to audiences today.

Consider Otto Bache’s (1839-1927) Flag Day in Copenhagen on a Summer Day, in Vimmelskafet (after 1892) [see page 17], which can be seen to summarize the chief themes in the exhibition. Though the occasion depicted in this pleasant city scene is King Christian IX and Queen Louise’s golden anniversary, it is Denmark, represented by the crowded streets of Copenhagen, that is the work’s actual subject. While showcasing Copenhagen’s modernization with its views of electric street lamps and modern shops along the pedestrian thoroughfare Stroget, which links the old and new parts of the city, Bache was also sure to include notable indicators of Denmark’s history, such as the spire of the Church of the Holy Spirit in the background. Although he remains relatively unknown today, Bache was a leading academician and influential figure in the art world at the time this work was painted. Danish flags and royal topiary overtly emphasize Danish nationalism, yet the fluidly applied, brightly colored brushstrokes and abruptly cropped composition highlight Bache’s interest in French Impressionism and mask the exacting approach of his academic background. Rather surprisingly, Bache’s painting was most likely inspired by Claude Monet’s Rue Montorgueil in Paris, Celebration of June 30, 1878, a famous urban scene of almost 15 years earlier that celebrated French nationalism. Bache’s selective incorporation of an international style and subject matter is representative of Danish artists’ dexterous capacity to employ the range of influences at their disposal to manifest quintessentially Danish images.

The influence of French art can also be seen in the earliest work in the exhibition, Nicolai Abildgaard’s (1743-1809) Alexander and Diogenes (c. 1780-1790) [see page 8], one of a handful of paintings included in the show that provides a basis for the Danish Golden Age style, against which artists of the Modern Breakthrough period would react. As one of the first students, professors and later director of the Danish Royal Academy, Abildgaard is considered a founding father of 19th-century Danish painting. Yet he also studied in Paris and Rome and was important internationally as a history painter. The subject of Alexander and Diogenes is derived from an episode from Plutarch’s The Life of Alexander and depicts the moment the philosopher asks Alexander to step aside because he is blocking

Vilhelm Hammersheil (1864-1916) made this Study Drawing After Plaster Cast of Ancient Greek Aphrodite Torsos from c. 500 B.C. Charcoal on paper, c. 29 ½ x 19".
the sun. With its moralizing message and Classical Greek subject, Abildgaard's work is a typical neoclassical history painting, and conveys the artist as both accomplished painter and learned scholar. The gestures of the two principle figures mirror one another and highlight the ironic disparity between their positions: Diogenes's moral superiority and innate elegance is emphasized by his simple dress and glowing, backlit head, the source of his intellectual power, while Alexander's dramatic step to his left renders his posture awkward and unsure. The dramatic lighting, deep shadows and the loose handling of paint of Alexander's drapery all point toward Abildgaard's interest in European Romanticism, with its emphasis on emotion and the sublime.

Abildgaard's Royal Academy set the standard by which Danish artists would measure themselves for the rest of the 19th century. As the most important and established educational institution and exhibition venue in Scandinavia, artists from all over Europe trained there. Based on the French model, the Academy nonetheless promoted a distinctly Danish style that was also espoused by the country's first art historian, N. L. Høyen. Høyen's vision of a collective Danish identity rooted in Danish history and mythology was a major source for the nationalistic Golden Age style, which eschewed foreign influence in favor of everyday themes and a rural, dignified Danish landscape.

The exhibition includes a riveting study by Danish Golden Age painter Christen Kobke (1810-1848), with his copy (c. 1828) of C. W. Eckersberg's Portrait of Bertel Thorvaldsen (1814, The Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen), a seminal painting in Danish art history [see page 14]. Eckersberg's training under the father of French Neoclassicism, Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825), and Thorvaldsen's (1770-1844) long tenure as an internationally celebrated neoclassical sculptor in Rome, point to the fact that Danish artists both sought international stimuli and had a significant impact on European art. Kobke's powerful rendering of the sculptor, which was painted while he was a student in Eckersberg's studio, removes the original portrait's signifiers of Thorvaldsen's status as an acclaimed sculptor, such as his academic medals and his hands, in favor of a close-up, penetrating portrait of a man deeply engaged with life. This is emphasized by the sitter's piercing blue eyes, which gaze at some unseen presence and reflect the sculptor's creative genius as residing in thought itself.

The aforementioned paintings reflect the way academic artists experimented with male portraiture to innovate the traditional pedagogic standards that dominated the Academy. It is perhaps the exhibition's exceptional selection of female subjects, however, that reflects not only the changing models of artistic education, but also the fluidity between private and public spaces and the evolving social and professional roles of women themselves. The fairly unknown portrait artist Ludvig August Smith's (1820-1906) Female Model

*Catching Mussels at Low Tide at Le Portel, France,* is in oil on canvas on wood from 1888. Lauritz Tuxen (1853-1927), c. 21 x 37”.

*J. Th. Lundbye (1818-1848) painted his Landscape Near Lake Arresø, Frederiksværk in 1838. Oil on cardboard or on paper laid down as canvas, c. 8 x 4 ½”.*
Before a Mirror (1841), like Købke’s study, is a version of a famous Eckersberg image. Smith, who had trained at the Academy, studied figure painting under Eckersberg. Eckersberg had a progressive approach to artistic education, introducing study from the live model in 1822 and from the nude female model in 1833—a practice that was then forbidden at the Academy. Smith’s Female Model is the result of one such session where teacher and pupils painted alongside one another from the same model. The clinging white drapery on the female’s hips and the contrapposto twist of her back highlight the classical connotations of the nude torso. The interplay of light throughout the composition creates a palpable sense of quiet contemplation and understated sexual desire that is further echoed in her concentrated gaze and hint of bare breast as reflected in the mirror.

J oel Ballin’s (1822-1885) Study of a Model, Young Girl Undressing (1844), is also the product of a session taught by Eckersberg from which studies by at least three other artists are known. The intimate nature of Ballin’s scene, which depicts the girl quietly undressing, lends it an intimate air of youthful innocence. The slope of her softly painted torso repeats the curves of the chair upon which her already discarded clothes lay and contrast the almost photographic realism of her crisp white chemise. Like her counterpart in Smith’s work, she is an idealized beauty with no indications of age or daily labor, and she seems unaware she is being watched. During the same session that produced Ballin’s Study, a female artist, Caroline Behrens, also painted a version of the female nude, demonstrating Eckersberg’s insightful attempts to encourage the development of women artists.

Smith and Ballin’s images serve as precursors to that of one of the exhibition’s most well-known artists, Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864-1916), who briefly trained under one of Eckersberg’s students. Hammershøi’s classical foundations are reflected in a rarely seen charcoal drawing, Study Drawing after Plaster Cast of Ancient Greek Aphrodite Torso from c. 500 BC (c. 1880), [see page 11] one of no fewer than seven spellbinding works by the artist in the exhibition.

The earliest image by Hammershøi in the Loeb collection, The Sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen, c. 1826, painted by Christen Købke. Oil on canvas, c. 21 ¼ x 18".
Hammershøi was part of the Modern Breakthrough during the last two decades of the 19th century, which shifted toward an increased engagement with international art styles. This was reflected stylistically with a focus on inner subjectivity and the imagination, as well an impressionist-inflected naturalism. The Modern Breakthrough would culminate in the breaking away by a group of artists that included Hammershøi and P. S. Krøyer (1851-1909)—represented in the exhibition by two effortlessly dexterous portraits of himself and his wife, Marie [see cover]—as part of the Free Exhibition in 1891, which would literally break the Academy's stronghold on teaching and exhibition practice.

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- Evening Atmosphere, 1861, is oil on canvas, c. 27 x 37”.

painted when the artist was just 16, Aphrodite Torso already displays the enigmatic and suggestive intangibility of light so characteristic of Hammershøi’s later paintings. Studies drawn from antique plaster casts were the foundation of every artist’s training until the late 19th century, yet even here, like Smith and Ballin, Hammershøi utilizes the female form to experiment with subtle gradation of light and shadow along the figure’s back. The result is pure alchemy, with hard plaster transformed into soft flesh. The work commencing the artist’s further explorations of contemplative females in sparse elegant interiors such as Study of Standing Woman, Seen from Behind (1884-1888), which depicts a robust woman engaged in unseen work virtually radiating within a mist of light. Such beloved Hammershøi interiors establish a melodic leitmotif with several other more brightly painted images in the exhibition by less well-known artists. Luminous interiors by Christen Dalsgaard, Carl Holsoe (1863-1935), Peter Ilsted (1861-1935), Christian Mourier-Petersen (1858-1945) and Ludvig Find (1865-1945) all attest to Danish artists’ preoccupation with assiduous and introspective women in images that engage a dynamic interplay of stylistic experimentation and exploration of the boundaries between public and private experience.

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Denmark’s most famous female artist. Ancher, whose wistful portrait by her husband Michael Ancher (1849-1927) can also be seen in the show, is one of two female artists in the exhibition—the other is Bertha Wegmann (1847-1926), the first female artist to gain a seat on the Royal Academy Assembly and a supporter of women’s rights who helped establish Copenhagen’s School of Drawing for Women. Anna Ancher’s preferred subject was the women she knew, elevating their often banal daily activity to that of devotional ritual. In Young Girl Reading a Letter (1902), radiant window light floods the Anchers’ dining room and frames the artist’s daughter Helga as she reads a letter with deep concentration. Helga’s body parallels the illuminated curtain to the right, while the sinuous geranium plant atop the table leans toward the young woman as if it longs to touch her. Unlike the works discussed above, here the female body is not an object on display but a fulcrum to investigate the play of the late Skagen summer light. Ancher’s loosely applied brushstrokes seem made of glowing light, a skill which was informed by time she spent studying in Paris. Her images, with their layering of local subjects with a Post-Impressionist application of bright, almost abstract color, evoke the position of Skagen as both a characteristically Danish and cosmopolitan painting milieu. Unlike many women of the period, Anna Ancher was able to transform her personal experience as a wife and mother into a successful artistic career, and her work demonstrates that more than anything else, the Modern Breakthrough was about the maturation of Danish artists’ confidence to unite their own locally inspired subjects while expertly incorporating international stylistic trends at their discretion.

Another of Ancher’s works in the exhibition, the incandescent On the Way to Church (1928), with its dignified triumvirate of three Skagen women, alludes to the prominence of the landscape in Danish painting, which since the Golden Age has come to signify Denmark itself. It is therefore no surprise that landscape scenes make up just under a third of the exhibition and reflect this small country’s enduring fascination with its

*Interior with a Woman Standing* is by Wilhelm Hammershøi (1864-1916). Oil on Canvas, 26 ½ x 21 ½".
local topography over the last 200 years. Johan Thomas Lundbye’s (1818-1848) Landscape Near Lake Arresø, Frederiksværk (1838) [see page 13] is a quiet but sprawling scene of the Zealand town and its majestic lake, which is only hinted at by a strip of blue beyond the foreground tree. As a member of the Royal Academy Lundbye was trained in a technically exacting style that sought to depict scientifically accurate details of nature, but here we see how the artist is more interested in the overall Romantic cadence of the lush rolling hills under a gently moving sky whose gossamer clouds echo the shape of the profusely sprawling trees below. Though not readily apparent, this focus on the quiet grandeur of Denmark’s land recalls the same allure held by the contemplative domestic Danish interior for artists.

DENMARK’S ENCHANTMENT WITH ITS LANDSCAPE WOULD lead artists to create scenes that conjured an evocative and nostalgic atmosphere in the shift towards Symbolism. Though Vilhelm Kyhn (1819-1903) was an ardent follower of Høyen’s insular nationalism, his Evening Atmosphere (1861) [see page 18] with its mood of peaceful revelry, is more akin to European Symbolism’s rejection of Realism in favor of dream-like landscapes. The tranquil reflection of warm light on the stream literally funnels our vision past the verdant banks toward the expansive, dramatically lit horizon beyond. The increasing shadows of the setting sun create a slightly morose atmosphere, further emphasized by the lone farmer who is transfixed by the dazzlingly lit landscape beyond.

Like Julius Exner (1825-1910) in his Self-Portrait, The Artist’s Last Work (1910) [see page 7], in which the dignified aged artist muses over what is perhaps his last work and the career that came before it, “From the Golden Age to the Modern Breakthrough” allows us to ruminate on these scenes of worlds that are forever gone but still uniquely relevant. The nexus of shifting values these works embody, such as the local and foreign, public and private, and progressive and conservative, enables them to remain open to new interpretations. Ultimately this refreshing selection of art work of the period demonstrates that what emerged in Danish art during the last 200 years was a way of looking at the world that was contemplative, engaged and self-aware.

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