

Nordic Art

Background Notes

Dr Jan Cox - 14 June 2017



Christen Købke 'A View of one of the Lakes in Copenhagen', 1838



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NORDIC LANDSCAPE: FROM CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH TO THE GROUP OF SEVEN

We follow a trail across the northern hemisphere that begins with Caspar David Friedrich - today considered a German artist - but born in Swedish Pomerania in 1774. His stark depictions of man dwarfed by the sublimity of nature attracted to Dresden the father of Norwegian landscape painting Johan Christian Dahl. Dahl, in turn, became tutor to the industrious and talented Thomas Fearnley, only now getting the recognition that is due to him.

Copenhagen, the training location of all three artists mentioned above, was the centre of the Nordic art world in the early nineteenth century. The influence of the great tutor Christoffer Eckersberg led to a 'Golden Age' of Danish painting, which reflected that country's nationalism following its defeat in the Napoleonic wars. The old guard of Danish painting gradually gave way in the 1880s to a French-influenced Naturalism, led by the most technically gifted of all Scandinavian artists P. S. Krøyer, who often painted with friends Michael and Anna Ancher at the art colony of Skagen at the very tip of Denmark.

In Norway, the mid-nineteenth century saw a rise in a National Romanticism, exemplified by Adolph Tidemand and his depictions of peasants in the beautiful Norwegian landscape. As in Denmark, this gave way to more informed and modern depictions at a time when Norway was striving for independence from Swedish control, exemplified by the 'Fleskum' painters Erik Werenskiold, Kitty Kielland and Eilif Peterssen.

Sweden, meanwhile, had its own tradition of portraying the country's spirit through depiction of landscape. Many painters were encouraged by the King's son Prins Eugen, himself an artist, exemplified by his purchase of a little archipelago for Bruno Liljefors, a fine painter of birds. Finland also had painters reflecting national characteristics as they tried to free themselves from the Russian yoke. Painters like Akseli Gallen-Kallela and Albert Edelfelt depicted pine and birch trees that acted as metaphors for the strength of the people, and portrayed the Finns themselves as stoical and tough.

In 1912-13, paintings from Norway, Sweden and Denmark were exhibited in the USA, and led to the formation of 'The Group of Seven', a collection of Canadian landscape painters who visited the exhibition and applied the Nordic ideas they witnessed to their homeland.



Erik Werenskiöld 'A Peasant Burial', 1885



Adolph Tidemand & Hans Gude 'Bridal Party in Hardanger',
1848

Reading List

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Saaabye, Marianne. *Krøyer: An International Perspective*, Exh. Cat: Hirschprung Collection, Copenhagen and Skagens Museum: Narayana Press, 2011.

Spencer-Longhurst, Paul *Moonrise over Europe: J C Dahl and Romantic Landscape*, Exh. cat., Barber Institute, Birmingham, 2006.

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Sumner, Ann and Greg Smith *In Front of Nature - The European Landscapes of Thomas Fearnley*, Exh. cat., Barber Institute, Birmingham, 2012.

Varnedoe, Kirk *Northern Light: Nordic Art at the turn of the Century*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988.



Lawren Harris 'Above Lake Superior', c.1922