Danish Golden Age Portraits in the Nationalmuseum – New Acquisitions Going Back a Hundred Years

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Returning to Copenhagen after his years of study abroad, Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg soon realised that his stipend from the teaching post he secured at the Danish Academy of Arts would not be enough to live on. He therefore turned to portrait painting, taking on a significant number of commissions. They were not always great art, but they did provide him with a living. A good many relatively repetitive head-and-shoulders or half-length portraits ensued, of individuals ranging from royalty to the wealthy burg- hers of the capital. His image of Governor Lund (Fig. 1), acquired by the Nationalmuseum in 1954, can be described as a standard portrait by Eckersberg. It is hardly ingratiating; rather, the artist has faithfully represented the external appearance of his sitter. The insignia of the Order of the Dannebrog, not least, are as important a focus here as the stubbornly fixed pale-blue gaze of the subject. As Eckersberg himself would have put it, it was a matter of “Truth” – what in modern-day parlance would be called objectivity or realism.¹ There is a matter-of-factness about the portrait, with little scope for empathy. Presumably that was not something the client had asked for, either. Governor Lund would no doubt have been satisfied with an external likeness; psychological depth was not a requirement for the creation of a social status symbol.

Eckersberg is sometimes compared to his teacher Jacques Louis David. And

Fig. 1 Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (1783–1853), Danish Governor Lund. Oil on canvas, 61 x 49 cm. Nationalmuseum, NM 5191.
doubt because he was far more successful in capturing the sitter’s personality, as well as having a lighter touch as an artist. His painterly manner was the very opposite of Eckersberg’s, which left few tactile traces. Jensen’s portrait of Elisabeth Horrebow (NM 5732) was painted when the artist was at his peak and was acquired for the Museum in 1963, the year before its major exhibition of Danish Golden Age art. Despite his successes with the royal family and other clients, Jensen never achieved the recognition he hoped for from the official art establishment. Eventually his commissions also declined, causing him to turn abroad in search of work. His portrait certainly we recognise the neutral background, with a relief-like space dominated by a few large tectonic forms. The same goes for the depth of field, but apart from that any attempt to compare the two artists always seems to bring out the many differences all the more clearly. The Danish painter, after his relatively short spell as David’s student, remained faithful to the kind of figure drawing he had learnt before going to Paris. Eckersberg feels far more statuesque, with little use of gesture. Nonetheless, in some of his best portraits he soars to great artistic heights. A striking example is his image of the sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen from 1814, of which several replicas exist. One of them, executed in 1832, was acquired early on by the Nationalmuseum (NM 2491). Eckersberg’s rendering of Margarethe Borch (NM 7330), painted in 1837, is also among his best and more original portraits,2 not least with its skilfully and playfully crafted illusionism, presumably in accordance with the wishes of the sitter’s father, Rasmus Borch, who commissioned the painting.3

Long before this, Eckersberg had found a competitor for portrait work in a younger artist, Christian Albrecht Jensen. Following his return from Rome, Jensen had become the patrons’ favourite, no

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**Fig. 2** Christian Albrecht Jensen (1792–1870), *Charles Robert Cockerell (1788–1863), Architect*, 1838. Oil on canvas, 29.4 x 23.8 cm. Purchase: the Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7321.

**Fig. 3** Christen Købke (1810–1848), *Portrait of Susanne Dorothea Købke, Born Ryder (1814–1889)*, 1832. Pencil on paper, 185 x 150 mm. Nationalmuseum, NMH 117/1972.
of the architect Charles Robert Cockerell (Fig. 2) was admittedly commissioned by a Dane, but was painted in England in 1838. It is one of Jensen’s best, showing him at the height of his artistic powers. Not only is it technically brilliant, it also captures the sitter in his professional capacity, with a sharp gaze and one hand shaped like a pair of compasses.

Other artists were not slow to follow Jensen’s recipe for success, among them several of Eckersberg’s pupils, such as Jørgen Roed, Constantin Hansen, Martinus Rørbye and Christen Købke. This is especially evident in Hansen’s image of his sister Alvide, painted in 1827 (NM 3308), and Roed’s portrait of Colonel von Darcheus, from 1834 (NM 6231). Not only the format, but also the intimate style recall Jensen’s portraits from the same period. In Rørbye’s portrait of his mother, Frederikke Eleonora Cathrine (NM 7025), too, we see traces of Jensen’s painting, despite it being done as late as 1848. Købke, seeking to establish himself as a portraitist from 1832, also soon absorbed the influence of Jensen. A portrait drawing of his sister-in-law, Susanne Dorothea Købke, née Ryder (Fig. 3), originates from that early year. Using the simple means of short cross-hatched pencil lines, he creates a fine sense of volume, with the play of light and shadow carving out the sitter’s face. Jensen’s influence is perhaps more clearly felt in Købke’s portrait of his cousin’s wife, Adolphine Emelie Petersen (NM 2345), painted the following year. Recent cleaning of this work revealed once again one of the subtle devices employed by the artist,
the lace at the shoulder of the dress, which turns out to be arranged in a delicate but effective relief.

Christen Købke, who had hoped for numerous commissions, thus had to be content initially to paint family members and relatives. This did not make him a wealthy man, as they were not in the habit of paying. Like Ingres, however, Købke realised there was money to be made from pencil portraits, which were less time-consuming than oils. Consequently, like the Frenchman, he too developed considerable virtuosity in this field. At the same time, there is very little pandering to his audience here. His unfinished portrait of the Swedish sculptor Bengt Erland Fogelberg (NM Grh 2208), whom he first met in Rome and later in Naples in 1839, has an almost Dürerian gravity about it. Another image from this period is that of his artist-friend Constantin Hansen playing the guitar, drawn on Capri at Christmas the same year NMH 148/1963). Both these portrait drawings are to be regarded as independent works of art, but Købke also used drawings to prepare for his larger and more ambitious works in oil. This was the case with another of his portraits of Hansen. These preparatory drawings are more sketch-like, with an emphasis on outlines and few indications of volume, and are often squared. One example was acquired in 2006, of the sculptor Stephan Peter Johannes Hjort Ussing (Fig. 4). Whether Købke ever painted this portrait in oil is not known, however.

The penetrating psychology of Købke’s portraits deepened over the years. Despite the often small format of his oil paintings, he achieved a large measure of monumentality. This is true of his image of his misanthropic uncle Peter Petersen (NM 7014), painted in 1846, two years before the artist’s death. Købke demonstrated
his ability to capture personality, and perhaps that of a young child in particular, early on in his career. According to his pupil and friend Lorenz Frolich, the fact “that Købke’s eye, in its purity, also saw most deeply seems to be borne out by his portraits of children.” Some of his finest portraits are of his nephews and nieces, among them that of Johan Jacob Krohn (NM 7285), painted during the same period.

Niels Simonsen is not an artist known primarily for portraits, tending to be associated rather with his Orientalist subjects. In the Nationalmuseum collection, though, there is an early portrait drawing by him of a young woman (Fig. 5), made in 1835, when Simonsen was a student in Munich. The sitter cannot be his fiancée, Anna Marie Petersen. She had been left behind in Copenhagen, and the young couple did not marry until two years later. The melancholy, somewhat faraway gaze, the sensuous mouth and the large locks of hair capture our attention. Despite its modest format, this portrait by Simonsen merits a place in Danish art history.

While portraits by both Eckersberg and Købke tend to attract a fair amount of interest, most surveys of the Danish Golden Age have overlooked the highly original contributions of Lundbye, Skovgaard and Frolich in this field. Their portrait drawings have quite special, independent qualities. They are markedly graphic in character, with ink lines of varying density, as if the idea was to turn the whole thing directly into an etching. In the work of Johan Thomas Lundbye especially, this is combined with a close and searching study, without the sitters seeming even aware that they are being drawn. These portraits are the very opposite of official ones in oil. They are of a private character,

Fig. 8 Peter Christian Skovgaard (1817–1875), Portrait of a Young Girl, 1849. Pencil on paper, 250 x 183 mm. Gift of Johan Thomas Skovgaard. Nationalmuseum, NMH 102/1963.

Fig. 9 Jørgen Roed (1808–1888), Portrait of Ida Gad, Born Tvermoes (1835–1908). Oil on canvas, 43.2 x 33.5 cm. Purchase: the Sara and Johan Emil Graumann Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7388.
and Lundbye’s attention is often caught by an earnest, sad or melancholy look, a mood which, if we are to believe the artist’s own words, appears to have suited him best.10 Something of a brooder, and an associate of Søren Kierkegaard, Lundbye appears to have had a particular interest in the inner workings of the human heart and mind. We get an inkling of this in his study of a patient at Frederick’s Hospital in Copenhagen, drawn in December 1841. The artist was staying at the time with his friend, Carl Schoubye.11 Most of his more penetrating portraits, though, are of family members or close friends such as Lorenz Frolich and Peter Christian Skovgaard. Sometimes Lundbye has contented himself with capturing a profile, but always at close quarters, a practice that did not become common until the 20th century with the advent of the photographic close-up. Some of the finest preserved examples of such drawings are to be found in the Hirschsprung Collection and the Royal Collection of Graphic Art (Den Kgl. Kobberstiksamling).

In 2017, however, the Nationalmuseum was able to acquire a high-quality portrait of this kind representing Frolich (Fig. 6). It is drawn on copperplate paper with a white ground. Lundbye used paper of a simpler quality for his portrait of Theodor Emil Neergaard, Master of the Royal Hunt, it too a new acquisition (NMH 20/2017). It is executed in the same graphic, linear manner and was evidently intended as a finished portrait. In 1839, Lundbye, who had fallen in love with his subject’s sister, Louise Neergaard, drew the various members of the family at Vedbygaard Manor in Ruds Vedby.12 This and many other portrait drawings were framed and hung on the wall.13

Skovgaard worked in the same manner as Lundbye, but somewhat more roughly, with broad lines. This contributes to the expressiveness of his drawings, an example of which is seen in the background of his portrait of Meta Boisen, the daughter of the clergyman and historian Grundtvig.

Fig. 10 Frederik Vermehren (1823–1910), Portrait of a Woman, signed 1852. Oil on canvas, 46 x 38.5 cm. Purchase: the Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7410.
drawn on Easter Day 1846 (Fig. 7). At the same time, the artist has reinforced and nuanced the varying density of line and sharp outlining in ink with a series of fine tonal steps in wash. This portrait was acquired by the Museum in 1972. It can be compared with another in which Skovgaard depicts a young woman (Fig. 8). The latter is done in pencil and is more delicate than his drawing of Grundtvig’s daughter. Once again, however, the artist has used a grey wash tone to contrast the sitter’s hair with her skin and clothing. Skovgaard’s sensitively drawn portrait dates from 1849. Already we can sense a different touch than was in evidence at the height of the Danish Golden Age. In all the artists active over the many years that followed – Constantin Hansen, Jørgen Roed, Wilhelm Marstrand and others – we see a shift towards a greater realism. Realistic portraits, to be sure, were nothing new. Eckersberg had already laid a foundation, on which several of his pupils built, among them Niels Peter Holbech. A portrait of an unknown woman from 1837 (NM 7411) is typical of the latter’s work. His intense, warm colouring, however, makes way for something more subdued. The characterisation is just as incisive, but the representation becomes more matter-of-fact. From mid-century onwards, therefore, portraits assume a more monochrome and serious character, a reminder of the competition from the new technique of photography. This is clearly apparent in two portraits of women by Jørgen Roed and Frederik Vermehren. The first is of Ida Gad, née Tvermoes (1835–1908), probably painted at the time of her marriage in 1856 (Fig. 9). The second represents an unknown woman, painted with a remarkable sharpness of detail that makes the brooch as important a focus of attention as the sitter’s eyes (Fig. 10). Another example of the same type is a painting by Ludvig August Smith (1820–1906), probably a self-portrait of the artist as a young man (NM 7422).
Wilhelm Marstrand was long celebrated as the wonder child of the Danish Golden Age. This was due in part to his deftness as a draughtsman, which meant that he sometimes had too easy a time of it in an artistic sense. Marstrand, originally a master of anecdote with an extensive output of genre paintings, eventually emerged above all as the portraitist of official Denmark, alongside Johan Wilhelm Gertner. Given the nature of the task, such images necessarily tended to get stuck in a fixed pattern. Greater immediacy and empathy are to be found in his sketch-like representation of his wife with their son, Poul (NM 7395). The same is true of his portrait of Helena Roed in Ludvig Holberg’s comedy Det lykkelige skibbrud (The Fortunate Shipwreck), (Fig. 11). The sitter was the daughter of his artist friend Jørgen Roed. She later married the Swedish professor Carl Rupert Nyblom and became a close friend of Prince Eugen. An important writer, Helena Nyblom would also, through her own testimony, be a key link between Danish Golden Age painting and Sweden. This makes Marstrand’s portrait of the young Helena Roed Nyblom a particularly significant acquisition.

Notes:
2. Recent infrared imaging of the portrait shows that Eckersberg had evidently made preliminary drawings, as the underdrawing on the canvas consisted of a carefully laid-out grid of squares.
3. Rasmus Borch (1768–1846) was head of the Royal Orphanage in Copenhagen, a portrait historian and major collector. Eckersberg’s diary is full of notes relating to Borch, who was a frequent visitor to his studio (see C.W. Eckersbergs dagbøger, I (1810–1837) – II (1837–1853), Villads Villadsen (ed.), Copenhagen 2009).
6. In a letter to the artist Christian Hilker, written in Naples on 11 August 1839, Købke observes that “Fogelberg has left, and sends his greetings. It was a spur-of-the moment decision that gives me little joy, as I had, with great pleasure, just begun a drawing of him, which I was unable to finish on that occasion.” See Kun en maler: Christen Købke Breve og Optegnelser, H. P. Rohde (ed.), Copenhagen 1993, p. 74. The portrait has a secondary inscription, not in the artist’s own hand, with the date “1840”. That this is incorrect is made clear by Købke’s letter. Cf. Hans Edvard Nørregård-Nielsen, Christen Købke, vol. 3 (Italien tur-retur), Copenhagen 1996, p. 63.
8. NMH 2/2006. This portrait is unusually large, 67 x 47 cm, further evidence that it was intended as a direct model for an oil painting.
11. Cf. Karl Madsen, Johan Thomas Lundbye, Viggo Madsen (ed.), Copenhagen 1949, p. 121. It is clear from Lundbye’s diary that he developed a fascination with particular individuals and their inner worlds. When the servant girl Mine passed away in the autumn of 1842, shortly before the artist left the hospital site, he was filled with thoughts about the woman who had just died; see Johan Thomas Lundbye, El Aar af mit Liv, Mogens Lebech (ed.), Copenhagen 1967, pp. 114–116, 17 October 1842. (My thanks to Jesper Svenningsen, a project researcher at the National Gallery of Denmark, for kindly drawing my attention to this interesting source and providing information about Carl Schoubye (c. 1793–1876), an official at Frederick’s Hospital, with whom Lundbye stayed for a year from October 1841.)
13. At the Bruun Rasmussen sale on 6 February 2017, an entire set of family portraits was sold, all of which had been framed for many years. The paper of most of them had severely deteriorated as a result of the old mounts used.
14. In her memoirs from her youth, Helena Nyblom recalls, for instance, how Marstrand arranged her hair to fit in with the picture of Holberg’s times (see Helena Nyblom, Mina levnadsminner, vol. I (I Danmark 1843–1864), Stockholm 1922, pp. 176–178).