

Allegory of Sunday – A Painting by Ditlev Conrad Blunck

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Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum Stockholm
Volume 28:1

Cover Illustration

Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), *Portrait of the Artist's Sister Lydia. Study for The Cup of Tea*, c. 1879–80. Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 39.5 × 60 cm. Purchase: Hedda and N.D. Qvist Fund 2021. Nationalmuseum, NM 7618.

Publisher

Per Hedström, Director General.

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Graphic Design

BIGG.

Layout

Ludvig Florén.

Translation and Language Editing

Clare Barnes and Bettina Schultz.

Publishing

Ludvig Florén, Magnus Olausson, and Martin Olin (Editors) and Ingrid Lindell (Publications Manager).

Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum Stockholm contains articles on the history and theory of art relating to the collections of the Nationalmuseum and is published with generous support from the Friends of the Nationalmuseum.

The Nationalmuseum collaborates with Svenska Dagbladet, The Wineagency, the Friends of the Nationalmuseum and the American Friends of the Nationalmuseum.

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Box 16176
SE-103 24 Stockholm
Sweden
www.nationalmuseum.se

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E-ISSN 2001-9238

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In June 2021, a large allegorical oil painting was put up for auction at Ketterer Kunst München. It was Ditlev Blunck's (1798–1854) *Allegorie des Sonntags* (figs. 1 and 4),¹ which was purchased by the Nationalmuseum. A contextual explanation of this work of art will be needed.

On the occasion of his coronation on 28 June 1840, King Christian VIII of Denmark (1786–1848) was given an album to which a number of Danish Golden Age artists had contributed an image. Among these contributions was the watercolour *Søndagen – en allegori* (fig. 2),² donated by Ditlev Blunck.

Two months later, in August, Blunck left the kingdom of Denmark, expelled with a *concilium abeundi*. For a while he took up residence at his birthplace Münsterdorff in the Duchy of Holstein. From there he embarked on further travels, to Berlin and Munich. From 1841 to 1848 he settled in Vienna, except for a period in 1845/46, when he again resided in Berlin, living in the house of his close friend, the architect Albert Theodor Karchow (1800–1870). Blunck and Karchow had met in the 1830s in Rome, where Blunck had lived as a fellow from 1828 after graduating from the Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen, in 1827. When the kingdom of Denmark



Fig. 1 Ditlev Blunck (1798–1854), *Allegory of Sunday*, 1841. Oil on canvas, 121 × 100 cm. Purchase: Sophia Giesecke Fund 2021. Nationalmuseum, NM 7620.



Fig. 2 Ditlev Blunck (1798–1854), *Sunday – An Allegory*, 1840. Watercolour, pencil, brown ink on paper, 34.1 × 26.2 cm. H. M. the Queen's Reference Library, the Royal Collection, Copenhagen.

was at war with the duchies Schleswig-Holstein from 1848 to 1850, Blunck participated with a troop of men, the so-called *Freischar Blunck-Magnussen*, on the side of the duchies against Denmark. After the war, Blunck ran an art school in Kiel for a short time with his friend, the painter Theodor Rehbenitz (1791–1861), and from 1851 he lived in Hamburg until his death on 7 January 1854.

Why did Blunck paint a monochrome allegorical watercolour for the king, when his artist friends all donated works with a perfectly idyllic Danish landscape in light and brilliant colours? He did so because he was a trained history painter who never wanted to paint romantic genre-like scenes as expected. The donation for the king's coronation was the closest he ever got to painting a grand Danish landscape with a typical Danish church. Despite this, the picture remained allegorical.

Already as a student Blunck was dedicated to history painting. The subjects of the genre were taken from the Bible, classical history and mythology or they were allegorical representations. History painting was the only genre you could compete in to achieve the climax of the academic painter's education, the Great Gold Medal, which Blunck received in 1827.³ He had come to the academy in Copenhagen in 1814 and progressed through the classes. After winning the Little Silver Medal in 1817 he attended the art academy in Munich from 1818 to 1822. On his return to Copenhagen, he chose Johann Ludwig Lund (1777–1867) as his professor. After the turn of the century and until his professorship in 1818, Lund had stayed in Rome, where he had become friends with the German artists' group *Lukasbund*, known as the Nazarenes, and its leader Friedrich Overbeck (1789–1869). The group painted religious motifs inspired by Renaissance Italian painters such as Fra Angelico (1395–1455)⁴ and Raphael (1483–1520)⁵ and the German painter Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528). The figures were like Raphael painted them, with sweetish features, the landscape was archaic with



Fig. 3. Ditlev Blunck (1798–1854), *Portrait of the Berlin Architect Albert Theodor Karchow*, 1831. Oil on canvas, 62.5 × 52 cm. Kunsthalle zu Kiel, KHK 389.

subtropical vegetation, and elements from medieval architecture were included, the colours dense and the brushstrokes straight and smooth and demarcated. Through Lund, Blunck was introduced to the ideology and way of painting of this group of artists whose style was Germanic and not the bright Nordic expression, which C. W. Eckersberg (1783–1853) represented at the academy. This influence of German style

and colour, and his dedication to the motifs of history painting, meant that Blunck was not a painter of Romantic nationalism and thus, even before he distanced himself politically from the kingdom of Denmark, he was at risk of becoming an outcast. Before finishing his education, he painted an altarpiece⁶ in the Nazarene style for a church in Denmark and several followed in years to come. Although he as a student had painted

some genre motifs, he was an idealistic and intellectual artist who later in life refused to paint genre motifs he could live on and stated outright that he would rather starve than fall into painting these lower genres, stating that “if art was nothing to me but a milk-giving cow, I certainly would not continue to be a History painter”.⁷

On the small allegorical watercolour *Sunday – An Allegory*, you see an archangel⁸ with crossed arms gliding across the firmament over a Danish landscape. A church and beech trees are visible in the foreground. Nature with a lake and hills that almost resemble mountains is the middle ground that forms the transition to the sea in the far distant. Around the archangel hover little angels with praise attributes, sheaf, spade, sword, harp, flower wreath, cross and the Bible as symbols of grandeur, fertility, growth, victory, strength, heavenly delight, holiness and belief. The corners of the watercolour have ornamentation adorned with rosettes, that is metaphors for the Sun as symbol of birth, death and eternity. The watercolour was the last Blunck painted in Denmark and the only work where he came close to painting the landscape in the manner of Danish Romantic Nationalism. It was meant as a tribute to the king.

Blunck was a history painter at heart, but throughout his career he had taken commissions, painting portraits of both the king and officials, and in the last years of his life he almost exclusively painted portraits of prominent families. This was the compromise he had to make to earn a living and as portrait painting was an accepted genre, of which Jens Juel (1745–1802) at that time was the most famous and esteemed master in Denmark, he did. In the field of portrait painting, Blunck also became the first of the Golden Age painters in Denmark who introduced the artist himself as a motif⁹ by depicting himself at work in his own studio with the divine light falling on his brow. These paintings are not to be compared with paintings of working artists in the study halls of the academy. Blunck wanted to show that the artist felt a calling, was

special, and a chosen one. During his stay at the academy in Munich, that feeling came to him as something of a revelation.

In the 1830s, Ditlev Blunck lived in Rome, where he met the Berlin architect Albert Theodor Karchow (fig. 3). They became close friends and the friendship lasted a lifetime. The oil painting at the Nationalmuseum, *Allegory of Sunday*, was a gift to his friend Karchow (fig. 4). Possibly Karchow already received it in 1841, when it was painted and Blunck was staying in Berlin. More likely is that he first got it in 1845/46 when Blunck again lived at the Karchows in Berlin. After his expulsion from Denmark, Blunck was in despair, but it was necessary for him to paint and sell works. *Allegory of Sunday* was possibly painted in the hope that this religious motif could be acquired by a church or perhaps as a devotional painting for a prince's chapel. As Karchow was a well-known architect and builder in Berlin, Blunck may have had the hope that he would be able to arrange such a sale of the painting, and therefore he initially deposited it with his friend. However, it was not uncommon that Blunck gave a painting or a portrait to a friend.

Allegory of Sunday seems identical to the watercolour donated to Christian VIII. The immediate difference is that this is a large polychrome oil painting in an imposing gold frame with decoration. But if you look closely, there are other modifications and additions needed to be addressed to another kind of owner.

The motif is an allegory on Sunday, the seventh day, and Christianity. It is painted in the German style both in terms of the colours and the landscape depicted, and there is a further diversity of symbols. You see lake, fjord and sea. A church with dual spires on the top of a mountain in the distance. It is a German church, possibly the Broager Church, which is located in the Duchy of Schleswig Holstein and could reference Blunck's birthplace Holstein. The first light of day colours the horizon in pastels and the sky in luminous blue. The morning light catches the finest play of

colours in the Archangel's beautifully ornamented chasuble, which is worn over the white robe. The chasuble is a symbol of piety and is worn on Sundays. Its red colour is a symbol of love and the gold a symbol of eternity as the highest spiritual recognition. Blunck has also inserted the holy cross in the ornamentation. The two angels of Sunday carry religious attributes, a Bible, a crucifix, and the third angel, a little cherub itself, is a religious symbol. Hoe, shovel and spade are symbols of everyday life, which on this holy Sunday, rest in a fine net of delicate sprigs. The whole scene exudes peace and calls for contemplation. Blunck follows the Nazarene concept, the union of the allegorical and the reflective, and the basic philosophy of Romanticism that life on earth is a wandering towards eternity, the final highest realisation, the symbiosis with the spiritual.¹⁰

This beautiful Sunday scene is framed in an ingeniously done gold-plated frame with foliage decorations. In the frame, the other six days of the week are inserted in *grisaille* as narratives of the days. Each day is depicted as a child holding the attributes belonging to the god of this individual day and must be read as metaphors of life and eternity. The names of the days are written in Latin, identical to the names of Roman gods. Roman gods have their *alter egos* in the gods in Nordic mythology which also gave the days of the week their names. Blunck thus unites in these symbols and names North and South. Monday and Saturday stand out from this order.

Dies lunae (Monday), Moon day. The child looks at the moon, the symbol of fate and the universe. *Dies martis* (Tuesday), Mars and Taurus day. The child who has a sword and dagger looks at a dead frog, meaning that it is practicing the struggle of life. *Dies mercuri* (Wednesday), Mercury and Odin's day. The child has a Mercury staff with a snake and a Pan flute. Symbols of strength, power and might. *Dies iovis* (Thursday), Jupiter's and Thor's day. The child is seen with Jupiter's eagle on the rock with stones of fire. Symbols of beauty



Fig. 4 Ditlev Blunck (1798–1854), *Allegory of Sunday*, 1841. Oil on canvas, 121 × 100 cm. Purchase: Sophia Giesecke Fund 2021. Nationalmuseum, NM 7620.

and force of nature. *Dies veneris* (Friday), Venus and Freja's day. The child holds two pigeons still in chains. Symbols of life beginning at baptism, later the bonds are loosened as love and spirit grow. *Dies sabbati* (Saturday), no god is referred to and it is not a child who carries the symbols, it is not about Roman, Greek or Nordic mythology but about the Jewish religion. Moses is seen at the burning bush carrying the tablets with the Ten Commandments.

The six days of the week show an idealised union between North and South and diverse religious faiths.

Ditlev Blunck gave *Allegory of Sunday* to his friend Albert Theodor Karchow in the 1840s and it was in the possession of the Karchow family until it was put up for sale by a descendant in June 2021 and purchased by the Nationalmuseum.

Notes:

1. Ditlev Blunck, *Allegory of Sunday*, 1841, oil on canvas, 121 × 100 cm, signed monogram and date on the back of the Bible, in original art frame with days of the week in *grisaille*. Provenance: Albert Theodor Karchow (1800–1870), Berlin; by inheritance to descendants for generations sold by a descendant via Ketterer Kunst München on 18 June 2021 to the Nationalmuseum.

2. Ditlev Blunck, *Sunday – An Allegory*, 1840, water-colour, pencil, brown ink on paper mounted on cardboard, 34.1 × 26.2 cm, signed “D. C. Blunck (in majuscule) SØNDAGEN” (cardboard bottom right), H.M. The Queen's Reference Library, The Royal Collection, Copenhagen.

3. Ditlev Blunck was the first history painter to be awarded the prize since C. W. Eckersberg (1783–1853) in 1809. The motif was *The Prophet Elijah and the Widow in Zarepta* (1 Kings, ch. 17 v. 23), 1827, oil on canvas, 122.8 × 99.2 cm, Akademirådet, Det Kongelige Akademi for de Skønne Kunster Copenhagen, inv. KASK KS 17.

4. Guido di Pietro (Fra Angelico).

5. Raffaello Santi (Raphael).

6. Ditlev Blunck, *Entombing of the Lord*, 1825, oil on canvas, 188.5 × 251.5 cm, deposited from Den Kongelige Malerisamling, Copenhagen to Thorshavn Kirke, Thorshavn, Faroe Islands, 1829, KMS 9; Ditlev Blunck, *Jesus Washes his Disciples' Feet*, 1834, oil on canvas, 115 × 180 cm, Vicelinkirche, Neumünster, Schleswig-Holstein; Ditlev Blunck, *Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane*, 1839, oil on canvas, 134.2 × 102.5 cm, Ude Sundby (Frederikssund) Kirke, Denmark. After 1840, Blunck painted several drafts of church decorations in Austria and in 1847 he painted an altarpiece for a Count Karoly in Hungary.

7. “...wäre mir die Kunst nicht mehr als eine milchgebende Kuh, würde ich gewiss nicht Tage fortfahrend, Historienmaler zu sein”, Vienna, 21 August 1842, The Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen, KB NBD II; Karin Bechmann Søndergaard, *Blunck: En biografisk og kulturhistorisk fortælling om en anderledes guldaldermaler og hans samtidige*, Nivaagaards Malerisamling, 2017 pp. 144, 278.

8. The representation of the gliding angel references Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844). See: *Night*, 1815, marble, 80 cm in diameter and *Day*, 1815, marble, 80 cm in diameter, Thorvaldsen's Museum, Copenhagen, A 901, A902.

9. See examples: Ditlev Blunck, *A Battle-Painter in his Study*, 1823, oil on canvas, 121.5 × 101 cm, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, KMS 57; Ditlev Blunck, *The Copper Engraver C. E. Sonne at his Study*, 1826, oil on canvas, 69.5 × 56 cm, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, KMS 51.

10. Blunck's masterpiece is four large allegorical paintings *The Four Ages of Man*, 1840–1845, oil on canvas, 170 × 142 cm, Statens Museum for Kunst, KMS 508a, KMS 508b, KMS 508c, KMS 508d. In Copenhagen he met the Danish poet Adam Oehlenschläger (1770–1851) together with his professor J. L. Lund at the home of the salon hostess Friederike Brun (1765–1835), Sophienholm by Lake Bagsværd. Oehlenschläger was the literary father of Romanticism in Denmark. And in 1828 he visited Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) in Dresden and saw his allegorical series *The Stages of Life*, 1803 and 1826. “He showed us, in addition to several other paintings, an attempt in successive landscape scenes to recount the human life, I must confess, nothing has ever seized me like this”, (Letter, 26 Nov. 1828, The Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen, KB NBD II, 11; Karin Bechmann Søndergaard, 2017 op. cit. p. 73). From then on Blunck was a faithful believer in the philosophy of Romanticism as it was interpreted by these artists and as Romanticism was born in Denmark by the Danish-German philosopher Heinrich Steffens (1773–1845) as a reckoning with the rationalism of the Enlightenment.