Scandinavian Oil Studies and a Portrait

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Fig. 1 Johan Christian Dahl (1788–1857), View Towards Vesuvius from a Terrace at Quisisana, 1820. Oil on canvas, 20 x 30 cm. Purchase: The Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7287.
In the past year, the Nationalmuseum has acquired a number of strong works by Scandinavian artists active in the first half of the 19th century: a portrait by Christen Købke, and oil studies of landscapes by Constantin Hansen, Martinus Rørbye, Thomas Fearnley, Johan Christian Dahl and Peter Christian Skovgaard (attributed). The Museum already had some fine examples of such pictures in its possession, but had long wished to supplement its collection so as to convey the full breadth of a period whose importance is steadily gaining recognition. Works from this period are among those most sought after by museums and private collectors alike – a fact reflected, not least, in the way prices have developed in recent decades.

With the paintings now added to the collection, the Nationalmuseum is able to get across more clearly the significance of the journeys to the south of Europe which many artists embarked on in the first half of the 19th century. Their hope was that such travels would foster their development to such a degree that they would be able to live by their art on their return. Given the complicated and exceptional nature of travel at that time, they set off with highly sharpened senses, ready to be assailed by a host of impressions of great intensity. En route, they documented their experiences in drawings, oil studies and diary entries. The drawings and diaries are undeniably a rich and fascinating source of information, but the oil studies hold a unique interest in this context.

Oil studies, in the sense used here, are studies painted in the open air.1 They have their origins, crucially, in the late 18th century, when French artists, led by Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes (1750–1819), began painting in oils en plein air. The aim was not to produce finished works, but to gather material for use in the studio. In these studies, the artists focused either on details such as vegetation and rock formations, or on views recorded in different lights and atmospheric conditions. Although the finished works were, at the time, still quite firmly rooted in the Arcadian tradition of the ideal landscape, it was considered important for artists to familiarise themselves with the smallest components of nature before, as it were, creating their own artistic versions of it from scratch. This they did in oil studies.

On what grounds can an oil study be said to hold a unique position, giving it a particular attraction even to a present-day observer? The explanation could conceivably lie in the immediacy of the representation that became possible as artists started to work in oils directly in front of the motif. They could now communicate, with a light hand and in colours that were true to nature, their personal experience of the landscape. What had previously been depicted mainly topographically could now be formed into an image without having to exclude lighting and atmospheric effects. And as these studies were not primarily intended to be either sold or shown to the public, there was, equally, no need to concern oneself with pictorial conventions of any kind. The subjects, moreover, often seem to have been chosen for personal reasons, primarily with what appears to have been the eye of the enchanted traveller. That enchantment, we may assume, partly explains the immense technical skill which many artists developed in their oil studies. Overwhelming encounters with new views were a source of intense inspiration, and the time aspect made the hand holding the brush – perhaps more than ever before in art history – an extension of the eye. The combination of enchantment and naturalistic representation is probably the reason these studies often came to be regarded as valuable souvenirs, kept by the artists for the rest of their lives. It may also explain why the experience they convey seems intact to the modern-day viewer.

The first three paintings that will be considered here are precisely such images from travels to the South. They depict tourist attractions that were either visited during extended stays or passed along the way.

Johan Christian Dahl (1788–1857) was born and grew up in Bergen in Norway. He decided early on to try his hand as a professional artist, beginning his career as an apprentice to a decorative painter. After that, since Norway had no art academy of its own at this point, Dahl had to travel to Copenhagen. He remained in Denmark for seven years, counting Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (1783–1853) among his teachers. On completing his studies, Dahl would have preferred to return to his native Norway, but the prospects of making a living as an artist there were poor. Consequently, in September 1818 he left Copenhagen for Dresden, where he planned his first extended stay. He would eventually spend the rest of his life there, but that is another story. Dahl had barely been in the city for two years before he set off on a journey to Italy. In those two years, he had become a close friend of Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), and through him got to know artists such as Carl Gustav Carus (1789–1869). Dahl’s close contacts with the inner circle of German Romanticism would prove significant for his subsequent creative output – not least for the work he did in Italy, and perhaps, in particular, for the study recently acquired by the Nationalmuseum. Dahl left Dresden for Italy on 13 June 1820. The day before, he had married – a circumstance that would colour his Italian trip, making him intensely homesick and causing him to return earlier than planned.2

On 10 August Dahl arrived in Naples, travelling to Castellamare and the country palace of Quisisana the following day. He had been invited to the palace as the guest of the Danish crown prince Christian Frederick. Dahl had become acquainted with the prince during his student days in Copenhagen, and the two had also met in Dresden. The first day of his visit Dahl was alone at Quisisana, as the prince and his court were visiting Naples. He spent the day painting the view from his room, seen through the window frame (Fig. 2).3 The small view which the Nationalmuseum
has now acquired is dated 16 August, which means that Dahl painted it on his sixth day, or rather evening, at Quisisana (Fig. 1). It records the prospect from a roof terrace. The dome visible to the left is that of the palace chapel. The view extends across the Bay of Naples towards Vesuvius, which is spewing lava (smaller eruptions frequently occurred between the larger ones). To the left, the observer’s gaze is led into the distance, into the haze beneath the sunset-streaked sky.

The most distinctive feature of this picture is the empty terrace in the foreground, which can be compared to a viewpoint or gallery. It was quite unusual for artists to put so much emphasis in their studies on the actual vantage point. One of very few clear examples, apart from the present painting, is in fact the window view Dahl had painted at Quisisana a few days earlier. Windows were admittedly not uncommon as a motif in visual art at this time, but they were almost always used in a different way than in Dahl’s study, where the view is still primary. Usually, the purpose of the window was to evoke a tension between inside and out, between near and far (famous examples being Caspar David Friedrich’s wash drawings from his home in Dresden, in which the river Elbe can just be made out through the windows, or Martinus Rørbye’s view towards the harbour from his childhood home in Copenhagen).

Technical analysis has shown that Dahl added the actual window frame after painting the view. Given how the wall in the recently acquired study is related in technical terms to the rest of the image, it is not unlikely that a similar procedure was used here. These paintings call to mind the relatively widespread passion for views during this period, which had quite a strong impact on both literature and visual art. It gave rise to what could be described as an attempt to build distance into our experience of the landscape, to make it more pictorial and thus allow fantasy and the imagination free rein in the human observer’s relationship to it. A good description of this can be found in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s (1749–1832) Sorrows of Young Werther, from 1774:

I have often, my dear Wilhelm, reflected on the eagerness men feel to wander and make new discoveries, and upon that secret impulse which afterward inclines them to return to their narrow circle, conform to the laws of custom, and embarrass themselves no longer with what passes around them.

It is so strange how, when I came here first, and gazed upon that lovely valley from the hillside, I felt charmed with the entire scene surrounding me. The little wood opposite – how delightful to sit under its shade! How fine the view from that point of rock! Then, that delightful chain of hills, and the exquisite valleys at their feet! Could I but wander and lose myself amongst them! I went, and returned without finding what I wished. Distance, my friend, is like futurity. A dim vastness is spread before our souls: the perceptions of our mind are as obscure as those of our vision; and we desire earnestly to surrender up our whole being, that it may be filled with the complete and perfect bliss of one glorious emotion. But alas! when we have attained our object, when the distant there becomes the present here, all is changed: we are as poor and circumscribed as ever, and our souls still languish for unattainable happiness.

Both the window and the terrace study can be characterised as an attempt to build distance into our experience of the landscape, to make it more pictorial and thus allow fantasy and the imagination free rein in the human observer’s relationship to it. Such phenomena can be described as “view hunting”, manifested for example in an urge to climb church towers on arrival in a new place on one’s study tour. A related development was the growing popularity of the panorama.
ins and water, it is unusual for the artist to let the viewer experience such tangible contact with the ground. More often, the vantage point seems to float in mid-air, as in the recently acquired study from Capri by Thomas Fearnley. It is important to remember, though, that Dahl most likely had no intention of selling or exhibiting his two paintings. He probably produced them for his own sake, as working material and souvenirs to take back home. When they were painted, the artist had just arrived in the area, and all its riches still lay unexplored before him. To that extent, it constituted a “dim vastness” with Wertherian potential, holding the powerful attraction which the studies convey through an inherent delight in the view.

The Dahl study just acquired is also interesting purely in terms of its technique—all the more so because it was not known what the painting looked like until it surfaced on the market a short time ago. The conventional understanding is that it was in Italy that Dahl’s art flowered from a technical point of view. It was here he developed the free, light brushwork which finds expression above all in his studies, but which was also of great significance in his studio painting. Up to now, this development has—on good evidence—been dated to November 1820, that is, a few months after his stay at Quisisana. Torsten Gunnarsson notes that Dahl became acquainted at that time with works by Franz Ludwig Catel (1778–1856), and later with the artist himself. However, the Nationalmuseum’s view towards Vesuvius, although painted in August, seems as free and as poised in its brushwork as the studies Dahl made from November on. As in several of his later studies from Italy, the ground layer assumes an important function, both technically and in the representation of light and of atmospheric conditions. It serves as a pinkish-grey sounding board, lending a warmth to the atmosphere, despite the darkness and the haze. Vesuvius and

Fig. 3 Johan Christian Dahl (1788–1857), View Towards Vesuvius from a Terrace at Quisisana, 1820. Oil on canvas, 20 x 30 cm. Purchase: The Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7287 (detail).
Fig. 4 Thomas Fearnley (1802–1842), *The Arco Naturale, Capri*, 1833. Oil on paper mounted on wooden panel, 61.5 x 46.1 cm. Purchase: The Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7281.
the bay are rendered with thin layers of paint, in brushstrokes that are as simple as they are ingeniously economical of expression. And although these areas border on the monochrome, the view does not strike us as simplified or abstract, but rather as detailed. A particularly good example of Dahl’s technical approach is the cloud to the left in the vertical centre of the picture, painted with a single, simple brushstroke, which together with an underlying pinkish accent creates an almost illusionary, naturalistic impression (Fig. 3, detail).

Dahl’s most successful pupil was Thomas Fearnley (1802–1842). Fearnley began his artistic career as a student at the newly established Academy of Fine Art in Oslo. He then went to Copenhagen for another two years of study, before moving on to Stockholm to complete a commission for the Swedish royal family. He remained there until 1827, studying at the Academy of Fine Arts under Carl Johan Fahlcrantz (1774–1861). In 1829 he travelled to Dresden to become a pupil of Dahl. Under the latter’s influence, Fearnley was able to shake off the rather conventional and conservative approach to landscape painting which Fahlcrantz represented. What made the greatest impression on him was Dahl’s view of study paintings, and the way he worked with them. From this point on, oil studies became a cornerstone of Fearnley’s art, and it is for such studies that he is held in the highest regard by posterity. The Nationalmuseum’s new acquisition depicts the Arco Naturale rock formation on Capri, then, as now, one of the principal sights of the island (Fig. 4). Just like Dahl, Fearnley chose a tourist attraction as his subject, and in the foreground he has in fact placed two tourists who have hired a local guide to take them to the spot. It is not unusual for Fearnley’s studies to include figures that add an anecdotal dimension to the subject.

Thomas Fearnley went to Italy in 1832, after living for two years in Munich. In Italy he travelled around, visiting several places more than once. Like Dahl, he was not content to remain in the vicinity of Rome, but also explored the southern half of the country. Several of his most interesting and technically brilliant studies come...
from Capri, and there are at least three of roughly this size representing the Arco Naturale. The other two are privately owned and were painted in full daylight, while the one acquired by the Museum appears to be a sunset scene.

One of the most fascinating things about this study is the way the artist has fashioned such a convincing synthesis of the cool atmosphere and the warm light of evening. Browns and blues predominate, in a wealth of different saturations. Fearnley seems to have been working against the clock, and to have begun by laying out his subject, the rock formation and the background, in a highly summary fashion. The paint is thinly applied – the oils are diluted to such a degree in places that they could be mistaken for gouache – and would thus have dried quickly. It is conceivable, therefore, that the scattered blue highlights on the rocks were added more or less immediately after the initial summary sketch. Already at this point, in other words, he had achieved the study’s distinct rendering of atmosphere. The next step was probably a kind of working over of the painting, adding outlines to carve out the terrain in detail. This study is an exceptionally good example of how Fearnley’s technical skill comes into its own under pressure of time. While the expression here is of a subtler kind, the result is on a par with some of
Fig. 8 Constantin Hansen (1804–1880), San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome, 1836. Oil on canvas, 26 x 26 cm. Purchased with funds bequeathed by Mrs Ulla Bella Sandberg and given by Mr Gunnar Hultmark. Nationalmuseum, NM 7143.
the artist’s technically most impressive studies, whose subjects, with their fleeting atmospheric conditions, required very rapid brushwork. As examples, *Gale on the Bay of Naples* and *From Balestrand at the Sognefjord* (both at the National Gallery, Oslo) may be mentioned (Figs. 5–6).

The Nationalmuseum’s next acquisition represents another facet of travel. Here, the artist found his subject on the way to Italy, in the vicinity of Chamonix-Mont-Blanc in the French Alps (Fig. 7). The peak in the centre is the Aiguille de Goûter. Martinus Rørbye (1803–1848) has been called the most widely travelled artist of the Danish Golden Age. Born in Norway, he moved to Denmark at an early age and grew up there. His first journey as an artist took him back to Norway. Then, in 1834, he headed south, for Italy. What makes him somewhat unusual is that he also travelled to Greece and Turkey, where he would paint some of his most interesting oil studies by far.

For Danish travellers, Jens Baggesen’s (1764–1826) travelogue *Labyrinten* (The Labyrinth) was virtually required reading prior to any visit to the South. It had been published in the early 1790s, and with the passage of time, of course, the scenery and settings Baggesen had described and recommended had changed. A letter Martinus Rørbye wrote home on his journey through Europe in 1834 makes this clear, expressing his sadness at the way local people in the Alps had adapted to the expectations of passing tourists.⁹ He had probably envisaged things looking more like they had done in Baggesen’s day. Presumably, in the view which the Nationalmuseum’s study records, Rørbye had found something to console a largely disillusioned traveller – a place off the beaten track. There is no trace here of the things he complains about in his letter; rather, he seems to have been fascinated by the play of the warm light on the rock faces, which he has captured with a skill that is as impressive as it is simple.

The two remaining studies, one by Constantin Hansen (1804–1880) and the other attributed to Peter Christian Skovgaard (1817–1875), are quite different at first glance, and yet have clear features in common. Both, it could be said, seem to build on a kind of poetic experience of what are in fact quite run-of-the-mill places. Rather than impressive monuments or broad landscapes, they depict an obscure corner of Rome and a kind of no-man’s-land, respectively.

In other studies from Rome by Constantin Hansen, monuments often oc-

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Fig. 9 Constantin Hansen (1804–1880), *A Street in Rome, Vicolo Sterrato*, c. 1837. Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 26 x 24.5 cm. National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen, KMS6640.

Fig. 10 Peter Christian Skovgaard (1817–1875), *Field of Oats near Vejby*, 1843. Oil on canvas, 33.9 x 36.5 cm. National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen, KMS4950.
Fig. 11 Peter Christian Skougaard (1817–1875), attributed to, Landscape Study, probably 1840s. Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 33.5 x 24.7 cm. Purchase: The Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7282.
Fig. 12 Christen Kobke (1810–1848), *The Artist’s Nephew, Johan Jacob Krohn, as a Child*, 1846. Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 cm. Purchase: The Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7285.
cupy a prominent place. In the one now acquired, what takes up much of the canvas is the quiet, deserted space in the foreground (Fig. 8). The explanation could be that Hansen was prompted by a highly personal experience of this particular location, rather than a wish to document a specific view. From the foreground, our gaze is drawn between a walled garden to the left and the church to the right, on down a steeply sloping street, and finally out across the distant, hazy blue rooftops of central Rome. It is easy to imagine how, from the spot from which he was painting, the artist felt the attraction, first, of the secret garden behind the walls, then of the dark, cool spaces within the masonry of the church, and finally of the endless, bustling alleyways of the city. A similar depiction of a place by Hansen can be found in the National Gallery of Denmark, A Street in Rome: Vicolo Sterrato, it too from 1837 (Fig. 9). It is conceivable that, because he spent such a long time in Italy, Hansen had a more relaxed attitude to the city, allowing him to indulge in this type of personal reflection or contemplation in oil.

Peter Christian Skovgaard did not travel south until quite late in life – at the age of 37, almost twenty years after his first exhibition. Thus, for the first two decades of his career, he devoted his efforts to his native country, with no experience of a lengthy stay abroad. Skovgaard’s paintings typically record undistinguished, unpredictable subjects. But they have a special lyrical dimension – an air of mystery, or a poetic shimmer. The former can be found, for example, in his many studies of a pond near Hellebæk, which, it seems, never ceased to fascinate him. The latter we can observe in the study recently acquired by the Museum (Fig. 11). Here, the setting could be the edge of an abandoned sand pit, and the arrangement and nondescript character of the motif are one of the reasons we believe the work can be ascribed to Skovgaard. There are also purely stylistic grounds for the attribution, in particular the way the greenery and the trees and their trunks are painted. A useful comparison is Field of Oats near Vejby from 1843, in the National Gallery of Denmark, which not only has a painting technique reminiscent of the Nationalmuseum’s new acquisition, but also gives a similar impression of being a personal documentation of a place the artist found particularly moving (Fig. 10).

The last of the Nationalmuseum’s acquisitions from the Danish Golden Age is a portrait by Christen Købke (1810–1848), painted in 1846 (Fig. 12). Child portraits by Købke are rarely on the market and, what is more, represent some of his most sensitive images. Together with the works by him already in the Nationalmuseum’s collection, this portrait will serve to illustrate the versatility and strengths of one of Denmark’s most interesting artists of all time. Købke was as exceptional a portraitist as he was a landscape painter. Like most artists of the Golden Age, he took many of his subjects from his immediate surroundings. His landscape paintings frequently depict scenes in the vicinity of his home, often unexpected and unremarkable views and perspectives, recorded with remarkable sharpness and with brushwork that was at once assured and austere. His portraits, for their part, often represent people close to him, in this case his nephew Johan Jacob Krohn (1841–1925). This likeness of the 51-year-old Krohn has all the qualities that put Købke’s portraiture in a class of its own. The presence of the sitter is strikingly immediate and alive, so much so that the picture seems almost free from conventions and preconceived visual ideas. Rather, it is as if the artist is simply letting us see what he has seen, mediating it in a way that makes us feel we are seeing it for ourselves. The painting, moreover, is an example of Købke’s outstanding technical skill, but also of how he never allows that skill to become an end in itself, but instead lets the appearance of the sitter carry the whole weight of the portrait. Precisely this combination of modesty and mastery can be said to be typical of the leading artists of the Golden Age, and presumably goes a long way to explaining why their works continue to be taken very seriously by present-day viewers.

Notes:
1. The expression “oil studies” can of course also refer to sketches in oil of different kinds altogether, such as those of Rubens or van Dyck.
4. For examples of window motifs, see for instance Sabine Rewald, Rooms With a View: The Open Window in the 19th Century (exh. cat.), New Haven and London, 2011.