

The Impact of Nordic Art in Europe 1878-1889

Jan Deryck Cox

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Abstract

The period from 1878 to 1889 was one of increasing success for Nordic artists in Europe, particularly in Paris which was the accepted centre of the European art world at the end of the nineteenth century. Although there were early arrivals of Nordic students to study in Paris in the late 1860s, the main influx of Nordic artists occurred at the end of the 1870s, attracted by the *Exposition Universelle* of 1878 and the exhibition of French art that took place in Munich in 1879.

Many Nordic artists undertook training at the Paris *atelier* of Léon Bonnat and the *Académie Trélat* where Bonnat corrected. The training they received was based around strong design skills, the importance of tone, and also of the composition as a whole entity. The art that was favoured at these studios were the Realist depictions of Millet, Courbet and Breton, and also Spanish masters such as Velázquez and Ribera.

Erik Werenskiold came to Paris in 1881, and adopted a French *juste-milieu* style of Naturalism that took a middle position between the academic works of the *Salon* and the Impressionist avant-garde. In the three summers of 1883 to 1885, Werenskiold produced *Peasant Burial*, a work that portrayed the more prosperous Norwegian rural class as modern Europeans, concomitant with the achievement of their first political power. Werenskiold's picture has far more in common with James Guthrie's *A Funeral Service in the Highlands* than with the picture assumed to be its source, *Burial at Ornans* by Courbet.

P. S. Krøyer received training with Bonnat, and quickly made his mark in Paris with depictions of rural working people. A poor reception in Denmark of his work *The Italian Village Hatters* led to Krøyer ensuring that future work was less open to the interpretation that it carried a political message. His depictions of fishermen at Skagen were supreme examples of his technical virtuosity, capturing light, texture and character.

Edvard Munch and Vilhelm Hammershøi exhibited only six pictures between them outside Scandinavia in the 1880s. Munch met with negligible critical reaction to his two pictures, while Hammershøi, although receiving more mainstream critical attention, was not encouraged by his Parisian exhibition experience.

Women artists faced particularly difficulties, particularly the ban on attending academies and life classes. Their strategies for coping with these problems included teaming up with fellow women artists to share studio and living space, and to provide a network of support that male artists took for granted. Harriet Backer and Kitty Kielland, Bertha Wegmann and Jeanna Bauck, are examples of two pairs of artists who engaged in this support structure.

Nordic artists received many awards at the Paris *Salon* in the period 1878 to 1889, despite the bias towards French art that existed there. However, the art that was rewarded was produced using French techniques, and often – at least initially – French subjects. Later, the synthesis of French technique and Nordic subject matter provided many of the most technically-accomplished pictures of the period. Nordic art was received far more favourably at the *Exposition Universelle* of 1889 than that of 1878, exemplifying the great progress that had been achieved by Nordic artists in little more than a decade. The 1889 *Exposition* represented a high point for Naturalist Nordic art, and many important artists ceased exhibiting at the *Salon* after this date.

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