Ude godt, hjemme bedst

Dansk og Nordisk Kunst 1750-1900, Statens Museum for Kunst

Statens Museum for Kunst’s “Danish and Nordic Art 1750-1900” opened in May of this year. And what an impressive sight it is! In all nearly 400 artworks are spread out over 19 rooms. These divide the collection into historical periods lasting between mostly 30 and 50 years. Each room is devoted to a genre (e.g. landscape, the body), theme (gender), artistic movement (Romanticism, Symbolism) or specific artist (from Nicolai Abildgaard to Jens Ferdinand Willumsen).

Now, I confess that mathematics was never my strongest subject at school. Yet if my calculations are correct, artists from Denmark account for nine out of ten works on show. Painters and sculptors from the Nordic countries fare less well. The museum’s claim that this is an “omfattende præsentation” might be true of Danish art. Yet the same can hardly be said of a “Nordic” show that contains just one painting from Finland: Albert Edelfelt’s Sommeraften ved Hammars hådverft, Borgå (1885).

This doesn’t matter. Why? Because I don’t consider “Danish and Nordic Art 1750-1900” to be an exhibition about Nordic art. If I am mistaken about this – if it is about Nordic art – then it follows the same line as that taken by Denmark’s first art historian, Niels Laurits Høyen (1798-1870). In 1863 he gave a speech entitled “Om national konst” in which he declared: "Tø migl den sikreste og retteste Vej til bestandig at komme i nærmere og nærmere Forbindelse med vore Brødre i Sverige og Norge, er at have os selv som Danske, ogsaa i vor Konst at gøre vor Nationalitet, sert Land, sere Sagen gældende, at vise, at vi ikke behøve et bruge fremmede Fjer for at smykke os med."

This is cited in the exhibition and is the only occasion when Denmark’s relationship with its “Nordic” neighbours is discussed.

Hvad er nordisk kunst? Eller, at stille spørgsmålet på et sprog, som alle i Norden forstår: What is Nordic art? Those in search of answers might well decide to visit Statens Museum for Kunst’s new exhibition of “Danish and Nordic Art 1750-1900”. If so, they will reach some rather odd conclusions, says Dr Stuart Burch. His thoughts on SMK’s redisplay forms part of Nordic Spaces, an international research programme supported by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond and a consortium of other funders during the period 2007-2012 (http://nordicspaces.com).
Højen’s quote is printed on the wall. It hangs in the air—just like Wilhelm Marstrand’s portrait of Højen on the adjacent wall. Its purpose is to raise national identity and patriotism as “issues for discussion”. The article you are reading takes up this offer. The surprising conclusion it reaches is that “Dansk og Nordisk Kunst 1750-1900” seems to actually follow Højen’s advice. For if Højen were alive today he would surely be delighted to see that in the year 2011, Statens Museum for Kunst had the audacity to give the title “Danish and Nordic Art 1750-1900” to an exhibition in which 356 out of 392 works are by Danish artists.

In the main, foreign artists are included only when they strengthen Danish national identity. A case in point is the Swedish painter Carl Gustav Pilo’s portraits of royal Dares. These appear in the first room that many visitors will see. An introductory text sets out some vague contextual comments about the decline of royal power and the rise of the middle classes. This is as close as we get to any historical context.

Encrusted changes must have taken place in Denmark from 1750-1900: a period of time that begins during the era of absolute monarchy and concludes with the so-called “Systemskiftet” of 1901 and the age of parliamentarianism. But any sense of social and political flux is glossed over. This creates an impression of Denmark as an eternal, unchanging backdrop. The exhibition is guilty of fostering a kind of “banal nationalism”. This is Professor Michael Billig’s term for the countless day-to-day banalities that serve to remind us of our place in a world of nations: these include news reports, sporting contests and even weather forecasts. So, even if nationalism is only tackled explicitly in the room with N.L. Højen, it is in fact present as a banal backdrop permeating every other aspect of the display. This explains the very odd treatment of “Nordic art”. It is an instance of Nordic nationalism—a Danish version of “the North” used for nationalistic purposes, just like N.L. Højen recommended all those years ago. He’d feel at home on a visit to SMK in 2011.

For Michael Billig, “the metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being constantly waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building” (Banal Nationalism, 1995, p. 7). This is illustrated perfectly by Christen Købke’s Vudsigt fra Dusseringen ved Sortedamssøen mod Nørrebro (1838), which appears on the cover of the guide to the exhibition. The label next to the painting intelligently points out that the flag hanging limply on the banks of the fancifully enlarged lake “accentuates the Danish nature of the scene.”

However, the nationalism on display at SMK is not always banal. Fervent, passionate, “hot” nationalism—the kind that leads to war—is evident in Den danske landsoldat efter sejren by H.W. Bissen (1850-51). We know he is victorious because of the work’s title and because the soldier has raised one of his arms in triumph at the same time as he tramples on the canon of an unseen enemy. But who was the opponent? The historylessness of the exhibition makes it very hard to know what he is so happy about. How many Danes (let alone foreign tourists) can make sense of this war memorial? The interested visitor has to look elsewhere to find out about “Træårskrigen” (1848-50).

The absence of historical information could be seen as part of a wider fear of interpretation somehow “getting in the way” of Art. As Beverly Serrell put it: “Art museum practitioners worry about visitors spending too much time reading; all other museums worry that visitors do not read enough”
State The Museum for Kunst’s “digital table” contains detailed information about 200 artworks divided up into multiple choice categories. This interactive facility forms part of the museum’s re-displayed collection of “Danish and Nordic Art 1750-1900”. Photograph credit: Stuart Burch.

(Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach, 1996, p. xiii). This isn’t to say that there is a lack of reading material. In addition to the “map” guide, wall labels and laminated sheets there is a room with computer terminals as well as what looks like a very, very expensive “digital table”.

These sources of information are all near at hand — but they are still at one remove. Resources might have been better spent focusing on the artworks themselves. Take, for example, Bissen’s triumphant soldier. The large-scale plaster statue stands next to a tiny clay model. These could have been juxtaposed with a photograph of the bronze version in Fredericia in order to link the artworks with the world outside.

This would have re-established the monument’s “social meaning” — the real world relevance that is lost whenever objects are relocated to museums (Noël Carroll, On Criticism, 2009, p.54).

Both Bissen and his rival for the Fredericia commission, Jens Adolf Jerichau (1816-83) originally suggested alternative designs for the monument, namely Uffe hin Spæge and Thor battling the giants. These mythological themes would surely have been relevant to an exhibition about Nordic art. The fact that they are not included underlines just how marginal “Nordic” is to this very nationalistic exhibition.

Despite missing this golden opportunity to address the multiple meanings of “Nordic art”, the display of Bissen’s two related sculptures does at least introduce a sense of theatricality. This is developed further in the room entitled “Kroppen i kunsten 1800-1900” where paintings and sculptures interact both aesthetically and thematically. This is exemplified by Wilhelm Bendz’s portrait of the sculptor Christen Christensen busy at work in his studio. His atelier is crammed with casts of ancient Greek and Roman statues, including the Borghese Gladiator — a real plaster copy of which stands adjacent to the painting.

Near to this statue/painting ensemble is Niels Hansen Jacobsen’s deathly sculpture, Døden og modem (1892). This forms a powerful dialogue with Ejnar Nielsen’s Mand og kvinde (1917-1919). The naked couple are transformed into Adam and Eve. They look on impassively as Jacobsen’s Death snatches a child from the grasp of its despairing mother.

Another artist who appears in the “Kroppen i kunsten” gallery is Ditlev Blunck (1798-1854). He is also included in the room devoted to “Kønnet i kunsten”. We learn there that Blunck’s homosexuality was probably the reason why he left Denmark for good in 1841. This links to what I consider to be one of the clearest and most successful subthemes of the exhibition: exclusion. Blunck’s banishment is one form of exclusion. Another is the erstwhile omission from the canon of Danish art endured by an artist such as Elisabeth Jerichau Baumann (1815-81). An account of her struggle for recognition is one occasion where regional matters are addressed; not in relation to “Nordic art” but in terms of being labelled “European” and therefore not properly Danish.

This was an accusation that could even be levelled at Carl Bloch (1834-90), deemed by some to be “Denmark’s greatest painter”. One exhibition label notes that “art history has chastised Bloch for his excessive use of theatrical effects”. But it is precisely this dramatic quality that has led the museum to use Bloch’s Fire et romersk austeria (1866) for the banner: motif hanging from the facade of the museum. This decision was therefore in some ways a bold choice — but this subtext is only apparent to those blessed with a lot of prior knowledge or the tenacity to hunt out information. Indeed, the exhibition only really comes
At times the arrangement of the artworks rivals the theatricality of a Carl Bloch painting. Here are two of the best examples. The image above shows how Wilhelm Bendz’s portrait of the sculptor Christen Christensen has been juxtaposed with a plaster cast of the Borghese Gladiator. The view below features Niels Hansen-Jacobsen’s tragic Døden og modern (1892) paired with Ejnar Nielsen’s Adam-and-Eve-like couple, Mand og kvinde (1917-1919). Photograph credits: Stuart Burch.
alive if one reads between the canvases, looking for what is not said. A case in point is the cluster of paintings by the German artist, Caspar David Friedrich. They happened to have been removed from display when I was there (in their place was a dehumidifier). So I was obliged to look more closely at the labels. I was surprised to see that they were all loan from other institutions. When I consulted the museum’s online catalogue I understood why. Statens Museum for Kunst does not appear to own a single painting by Friedrich. Isn’t this rather remarkable? How can this be? What does this say about collecting practices over the years?

We get a hint of the personal prejudices that guide acquisition policy via the label next to the portrait of the aforementioned N.L. Højen. He was curator of Den Kongelige Malerisamling – the forerunner to SMK. We learn that he had clear likes and dislikes. His confident portrait shows him with his left hand raised as if directing the viewer’s gaze to the kind of art that he both admired and promoted. Højen’s portrait could have been provocatively framed with works by Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (“good” art) and Nicolai Abildgaard (“bad” art). This would have brought SMK and its leaders into the spotlight: what role did and does the museum play when it comes to defining Danish art? Is it a passive reflector of the times or does it drive taste? Does it reflect the views of the many or of a select few? How do Højen’s judgements match those of today’s leadership? And how could and should SMK develop in the future?

Such a line of questioning would have developed the “On the one hand... on the other” idea (a series of laminated sheets on which two curators present alternative readings of the same artworks). It would have also deployed the art of the period to make potentially contentious points instead of relying on the inclusion of jarringly contemporary works such as Lise Harley’s My Own Country (2005). Their anachronistic presence weakens the chronological parameters of the exhibition and also gives the inaccurate impression that it is only today’s artists who are capable of being radical and shocking.

Sticking to artists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries might have encouraged the curators to give more thought to the temporal parameters of the show. The choice of 1750-1900 seems arbitrary: just a neat start and end date by which to “frame” the exhibition. Frames are not just ornate borders around a painting. The period 1750-1900 is a timeframe. More specific “framings” were available. I learned from the exhibition that Det Kongelige Danske Kunstakademii was founded in 1754. So why not have this as the emphatic starting point? And why not bring it to an open-ended close with the completion of J. Vilhelm Dahlerup’s Statens Museum for Kunst building in 1896? Both institutions exist today, even if they have gone through lots of changes. We could have been given a glimpse of how these two organisations have defined and shaped Danish and Nordic art over time. Their alternative “framings” of art history would have conceptually developed SMK’s excellent Frames: State of the Art exhibition of 2008.

Instead, the decision to choose 1750 and 1900 as convenient limits points to a lack of self-reflection on the curators’ part. With notable exceptions, it is difficult to determine the criteria used for including much of the art on show. This makes the use of the word “Nordic” in the title even more troublesome. What do the curators actually mean by this term? Is Holland a Nordic nation? Is that why a self-portrait by the Dutch artist, Jan Verkade (1868-1946) has been included?

If SMK’s museum leadership really were intent on interrogating the relationship between Danish and Nordic art from 1750, they ought to have sought permission to borrow Nationalmuseet’s exquisite Grønlænderinden Marie (c.1753). This tiny, full-length portrait by Mathias Blumenthal (1719-1763) depicts Jomfru Maria Epeybug Datter, a much-travelled resident of Vestgrønland. Just think if she were given the first word! Her lish, ribbon-tied hair, tattooed body and hooded caribou skin “gown” shows that, like Niels Lauris Højen, she had no need of “borrowed feathers” for her adornment.

Blumenthal’s Grønlænderinden Marie would have really kicked-started an exhibition of Dansk og Nordisk Kunst 1750-1900. And it would have also provided the ideal symbol by which to announce the imminent arrival of the National Gallery of Art for Greenland. Last February it was confirmed that the commission had been won by the architectural practice Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG). When the museum opens in Nuuk the question of what is “national” and what is “Nordic” will trigger genuine “issues for discussion”. Let us hope that SMK plays a leading and self-reflective role in the ensuing debate.