

# Ude godt, hjemme bedst

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



*Jens Juel's grandiose portrait of the merchant Niels Ryberg together with his son and daughter-in-law (1797) is the first image to greet the visitor. It is used to signal the rise of the mercantile classes and the decline of royal power as well as "an all-new view of nature" and the autonomy of children inspired by the thinking of Rousseau. Photograph credit: Stuart Burch.*

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>).

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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 bådeværft, 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 kunst" in which he declared:

*Tro mig! den sikreste og retteste Vej til bestandig at komme i nærmere og nærmere Forbindelse med vore Brødre i Sverig og Norge, er at hævde os selv som Danske, ogsaa i vor Konst at gjøre vor Nationalitet, vort Land, vore Sagn gjældende, at vise, at vi ikke behøve at 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.





*H.W. Bissen's Den danske landsoldat efter sejren (1850-51) is jubilant. But what was he so happy about? Photograph credit: Stuart Burch.*

Høyen's quote is printed on the wall. It hangs in the air – just like Wilhelm Marstrand's portrait of Høyen 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 Høyen's advice. For if Høyen 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 Danes. 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.

Enormous 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. Høyen, 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. Høyen 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 *Udsigt fra Dosseringen 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 “Treårskrigen” (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”





Statens 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 redisplayed 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 Spage* 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 moderen* (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 (1819-81). 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 extensive use of theatrical effects". But it is precisely this dramatic quality that has led the museum to use Bloch's *Fra et romersk osteria* (1866) for the banner motif hanging from the façade 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 plastercast of the Borghese Gladiator. The view below features Niels Hansen Jacobsen's tragic *Døden og moderen* (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 on 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. Høyen. 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. Høyen'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 Høyen's judgements match those of today's leadership? And how could and should SMK develop in the future?

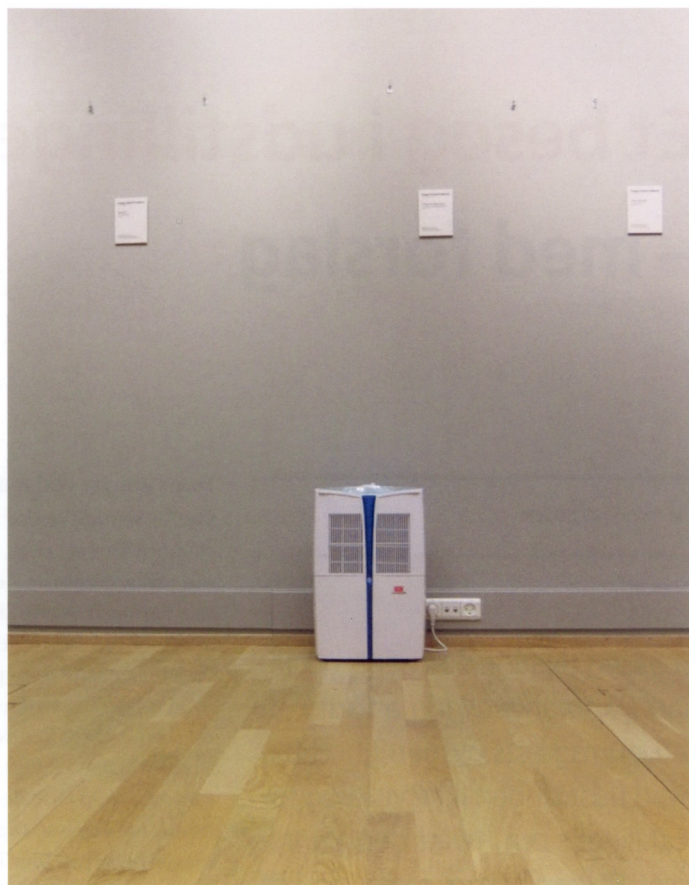
Such a line of questioning would have developed the "On the one hand... on the other" idea (a series of laminated sheets on which two curators present alternative readings of the same artworks). It would have also deployed the art of the period to make potentially contentious points instead of relying on the inclusion of jarringly contemporary works such as Lise Harlev'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 pe-

riod 1750-1900 is a timeframe. More specific "framings" were available. I learned from the exhibition that Det Kongelige Danske Kunstakademi 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 *Grøn-lænderinden Maria* (c.1753). This tiny, full-length portrait by Mathias Blumenthal (1719-1763) depicts Jomfru Maria Epeyubs Datter, a much-travelled resident of Vestgrønland. Just think if she were given the first word! Her lush, ribbon-tied hair, tattooed body and hooded caribou skin "gown" shows that, like Niels Laurits Høyen, she had no need of "borrowed feathers" for her adornment.

Blumenthal's *Grøn-lænderinden Maria* would have really kick-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-reflexive role in the ensuing debate.



*Caspar David Friedrich where are you? SMK does not appear to own any oil paintings by this leading "Nordic" artist. It has therefore had to borrow works to fill the gaps. On my visit all that was visible were the labels... and a dehumidifier. Photograph credit: Stuart Burch.*