

CHRISTOFFER WILHELM

**ECKERSBERG**



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OTTO EVENS  
*Portrait of C.W. Eckersberg*, 1865.  
Charlottenborg Foundation  
on permanent loan to SMK

# FOREWORD

*He who cannot lie does not know what truth is*

Friedrich Nietzsche

■ Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg paved the way for modern painting. Without the understated transition away from classical history painting to studies of nature's essential forms effected by him and other artists such as J.A.D. Ingres, later artists like Paul Cézanne or Edvard Weie would not have had the same starting point for their work with the picture plane, nor for their poetic liberation of colour itself. In his own day, Eckersberg struck a highly successful balance between a fundamental respect for the actual visual appearance of the physical world and a keen sense for the formal architecture of paintings. Eckersberg's art was as far removed from the dramatic history paintings that dominated nineteenth-century French salons as it was from complete one-to-one verisimilitude. His imagery and approach took its starting point in classicist art theory and was infused by scientific and philosophical idealism. He held the belief that the objects we see in the world contain an essence, an idea that the painting should reach in order to be true. To Eckersberg, the secret behind a true painting resided in a correspondence between appearance and idea, between the forms and what he called "Grundbilledet" – the Fundamental Image. Such correspondence required careful study of nature, including a keen understanding of the effects of light and colour, but it also demanded great accuracy in accordance with the laws of perspective: all objects must be correctly scaled and placed in relation to each other. The overall whole must be compellingly realistic, revealing no traces of the flat surface on which it was painted.

Eckersberg was among those artists who first saw the space between the reality conveyed by our senses and an underlying order, and how this space offers scope for artistically and philosophically interesting interactions. His method consisted in an unprejudiced study of nature, and in this regard he was not far removed from his friend, the scientist H.C. Ørsted, who also sought the spiritual in nature. Both believed that reason underpinned the visible forms of our world, and seen from this perspective truth appeared with the greatest clarity when nature and spirit were harmoniously aligned. Eckersberg

engaged simultaneously with matters of perception and of system, and in this regard he became a role model for later generations of artists, including the modern painters. Eckersberg did, however, remain an idealist, unlike artists such as Cézanne; to Cézanne a painter could only work with how the world appears to him. For the moderns, the question of truth concerned the truth of painting and experience, not the truth of nature in itself.

Eckersberg increasingly reached his objective – truth and beauty – by adapting and tightening up the natural world in his paintings; nature might well serve as a pattern for the artist, but it was also full of random, unimportant details. Beauty required a certain amount of lying; not a lie in the sense of deliberate distortion, but rather a lie used as a poetic way of achieving a more ideal image.

The exhibition *Eckersberg – A Beautiful Lie* is the first major retrospective presentation of the artist's work since 1983. It reintroduces one of the most groundbreaking and cosmopolitan Danish artists of the early nineteenth century to new audiences – and a chance to see "the Father of Danish painting" in a new light. The exhibition does not offer a slavishly chronological account from cradle to grave. Instead we focus on five themes that shed light on important aspects of his work and cut across the traditional genres he worked with. The five themes are: views of nature, portraying people, the human body, storytelling and image construction.

The SMK is proud to present these new research perspectives on Eckersberg's work. We are truly grateful to the following foundations for their generous support: Augustinus Fonden, 15. Juni Fonden, Beckett-Fonden, KrogagerFonden, Dronning Margrethes og Prins Henriks Fond, and Lizzie og Ejler Ruges Kunstfond, which enabled us to carry out restoration and conservation work on Otto Evens's portrait sculpture of Eckersberg. Particular thanks are due to The C.L. David Foundation and Collection for their support for the production and publication of this catalogue. We also wish to thank the exhibition sponsors De friske malere and Babette. Finally, special thanks are due to ambassador John L. Loeb.

Director of SMK Mikkel Bogh ■

BIOGRAPHY

**1783** Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg is born in Blaakrog in the parish of Varnæs in Schleswig (now part of the south of Denmark). He grows up in Blans, where he receives his first training from local masters

**1803–09** Trains as a history painter at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen; makes a living by creating images for popular prints of everyday motifs, moralising tales and – especially – the Bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807

**1809** Wins the Academy's Gold Medal

**1809–10** Paints twelve scenes from the island of Møn for Christopher von Bülow

**1810–13** Travels to Paris, where he is taught by the artist Jacques-Louis David; paints religious subjects, history paintings and views of the city

**1813–16** Travels to Rome, where he receives support and advice from the sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen; he introduces open-air painting in Danish art and adds new facets to Danish art with his views of Rome

**1816–25** Becomes the most sought-after portrait painter in Denmark

**1817** Becomes a member of The Royal Academy of Fine Arts

**1818** Is appointed Professor of the Academy's Model School and

moves in at Charlottenborg, home of the Academy. Continues his tenure for 35 years, up until his death

**1819–41** Paints eight history paintings for Christiansborg Palace

**1821** Marines become Eckersberg's favourite subject

**1830s** Eckersberg introduces life classes with female nude models; he also becomes one of the first academy professors in Europe to teach open-air painting

**1833** Eckersberg grows increasingly interested in image construction and publishes *Attempt at a Manual on the Use of Perspective for Young Painters*

**1836** Everyday scenes of street life once again become a key part of his art

**1841** Publishes his treatise *Linear Perspective as Applied in Painting*

**1853** Dies of cholera

Eckersberg marries three times: His first wife (1810–16) is Christine Rebekka Hyssing (b. 1783–d. circa 1852), his second wife (1817–27) is Julie Juel (b. 1791–d. 1827) and his third wife (1828–40) is Sanne Juel (b. 1793–d. 1840), the sister of Julie Juel. The two sisters are both the daughters of Eckersberg's great role model, Jens Juel. Eckersberg has eleven children in total.

# ECKERSBERG ON THE EUROPEAN STAGE

Kasper Monrad

Detail from *The Marble Steps*  
leading to the Church of Santa Maria  
in Aracoeli in Rome, 1814/16.

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■ Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg has been credited with being the great innovator of Danish art. Around 1815 he laid down the foundations for a style of painting that would define an entire era, the so-called Danish Golden Age. During his 35-year tenure as professor at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, virtually all young Danish painters were influenced by him. Romantic whimsy, fierce dramatics and violent emotions were anathema to him. His sober temperament not only infused his own art; it also made a crucial impact on his students' paintings. Hence, his influence is very much the reason why Danish Golden Age art has never been labelled Romantic.<sup>1</sup>

Even though Eckersberg was an artist of great rationality and firm principles, his life and art were also full of paradoxes. He received absolutely crucial inspiration for his art from abroad, but later in life he completely blocked out all outside inspiration. His early ambitions focused on the type of painting that enjoyed the greatest official acclaim at the time – history painting – but his crucial impact on the world of art was associated with other types of painting that were accorded lesser significance at the time.

Eckersberg made studies from nature a firmly embedded aspect of his art, but he can only be said to have been a landscape painter in the strict sense of the term *before* he embarked on such studies. He placed great emphasis on painstaking observation of all details, and he strove for verisimilitude in the depiction of his chosen subjects. Even so, his work is not realism in the sense of exact, unedited representations of reality. While it is true that he declared nature to be his role model, he in no way attempted to depict reality unvarnished; he aimed rather to extract the essence of what he saw. In his own words, he strove for “Truth”. Eckersberg depicted his subject matter on the basis of on an idea of how it would appear under optimum conditions. In this regard his endeavours aimed for the ideal.<sup>2</sup> As a teacher he imposed the same strict requirements on his students that he laid upon himself, and he chastised them if they did not consistently refer and relate to their specific subjects, venturing instead into reshaping and processing them. Nevertheless, he himself might well decide to adjust important details in his own paintings.

## IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF JUEL AND ABILDGAARD

Eckersberg's education was infused by an international outlook. Having received his initial training with local craftsmen and artists near his birthplace in the duchy of Schleswig (in present-day Sønderjylland/North Schleswig), he arrived in Copenhagen in 1803, where he continued his training at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. Here he was seminally influenced by two professors whose art was indebted to international movements of the era – one was the history painter Nicolai Abildgaard (1743–1809), the other was the recently deceased portrait and landscape painter Jens Juel (1745–1802). Both artists spent several years studying art in Rome in their youth; they also studied in Paris for brief

periods of time, and Juel spent three years in Switzerland. They were the two main figures within Danish art at the time – one specialising in history painting, the other in portraits and landscapes.

Around this time the Copenhagen Academy enjoyed a certain international reputation, and the school attracted several artists from northern Germany. Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) and Philipp Otto Runge (1777–1810) both studied there some years prior to Eckersberg's enrolment, and the Danish master would later be joined by Georg Friedrich Kersting (1785–1847) as a fellow student for a few years.<sup>3</sup> Having completed his formal education at the academy – which he capped



by being awarded the academy's Gold Medal in 1809 – he continued by taking an additional three years of studies abroad; first in Paris and then in Rome.

Eckersberg followed the established route set out for young, ambitious artists at the time and strove to make his mark as a history painter. Even though he and Abildgaard were unlikely to have been closely acquainted, there can be no doubt that he learnt from his professor in this regard. By example alone, Abildgaard would have been an inspiration – as a court painter he undertook several major commissions for the royal palace of Christiansborg, and the young Eckersberg would almost certainly have entertained hopes of being commissioned to do work for the new palace that was planned to replace the old one after the palace fire in 1794. Such hopes would only have been fanned further when Abildgaard died in 1809, leaving a large commission for the palace unfinished. The inspiration from Abildgaard may be most clearly evident in Eckersberg's 1806 painting *Alexander the Great on his Sickbed* [2, cat. 3]. Abildgaard had evinced an interest in the ancient warrior king on numerous occasions. The most obvious comparison would be to juxtapose Eckersberg's painting and his teacher's painting *Two Young Men Con-*

*fessing to Alexander the Great their Conspiracy against Him* [1].<sup>4</sup> The two paintings may seem quite similar at first glance.<sup>5</sup> Both show Alexander in a gloomy room, reclining on a bed placed parallel to the picture plane, and both relate to a potential conspiracy against the ruler. However, comparing the two works reveals a crucial difference between the artistic temperaments of the two painters: Abildgaard infuses his scene with great drama, whereas Eckersberg has avoided any suggestion of the theatrical. His painting is also far more subdued in tone, and the conflict inherent in the subject is merely hinted at. Even at this early stage, Eckersberg showed his true colours as an artist. He consistently avoided high-tension drama.

Eckersberg's inspiration from Juel was, of course, limited to the influence exerted by Juel's art in itself; the older painter died in 1802, the year before Eckersberg arrived in Copenhagen. The young artist did in fact establish an acquaintanceship with the artist's widow, but even more importantly he came to work for Johan von Bülow, a chamberlain and art collector. In 1806 von Bülow commissioned him to do a series of paintings showing scenes from his estate, Sanderumgaard on the island of Funen.<sup>6</sup> In von Bülow's collection Eckersberg

[1]  
NICOLAI ABILDGAARD  
*Two Young Men Confessing  
to Alexander the Great their  
Conspiracy against Him*,  
circa 1800. SMK



[2]  
 C.W. ECKERSBERG  
*Alexander the Great on his  
 Sickbed*, 1806. SMK. Cat. 3



[3]  
C.W. ECKERSBERG  
*Farm in Spejlsby on Møn,*  
1810. Kunsthalle zu Kiel.  
Cat. 11

[4]  
JENS JUEL  
*A Storm Brewing behind  
a Farmhouse in Zealand,*  
circa 1793. SMK





would have been able to see several landscapes by Juel, including his prominent masterpiece *A Storm Brewing behind a Farmhouse in Zealand* [4].<sup>7</sup> Eckersberg benefited from this three years later, when he was commissioned to do another series of landscape paintings showing scenes of Møn, this time by the chamberlain's nephew, Christopher von Bülow. Juel's depiction of the distinctive light caused by the approaching storm was clearly underpinned by a personal experience of nature's moods and atmospheres, and this was a new departure in Danish art. Eckersberg's *Farm in Spejlsby on Møn* [3, cat. 11] is quite obviously indebted to Juel's painting.<sup>8</sup> Both paintings show a farm being hit by a rainstorm, and Eckersberg's motif is based on the same principles as his role model: a country lane leads up to the farm from the right, and the farm itself is lit up by rays of

sunshine in the middle distance to the left. But whereas Juel created a subtle, sophisticated interplay between the lowering rain clouds and the last rays of the sun, Eckersberg allowed his subject to be framed by a rainbow in a rather more schematic fashion.<sup>9</sup>

In some of the paintings of scenes from Møn, Eckersberg demonstrates his maturity as an artist, particularly in *Landscape with a Stile* from 1810 [8, cat. 12]. From an elevated vantage point near the island's chalk cliffs, he takes a panoramic view out to the west, across the island. The preliminary sketch drawing of this scene [cat. 104] tells us that he observed the landscape in bright daylight. However, back home in his Copenhagen studio he not only decided to add the half-dead tree, which has a prominent impact on the entire composition; he also decided to turn the work into an even-

[5]  
C.D. FRIEDRICH  
*Coastal Landscape in Evening  
Light*, circa 1815/16. Die Museen  
für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte  
der Hansestadt Lübeck



[6]

C.W. ECKERSBERG  
*View of the Park of Liselund  
Manor on the Island of Møn,*  
1809. SMK. Cat. 10

[7]

G.F. KERSTING  
*The Cascade in Frederiksberg  
Garden, Zealand, 1808.*  
Museum of Copenhagen,  
long term loan to SMK

ing scene, taking place around sunset. Attention is directed to the setting sun, and he has tinted the sky in yellows and reds. By doing this, the painter added even greater gravitas to the atmospheric elements in this painting, compared to his other scenes from Møn. The painting strikes a particular note that Eckersberg might have pursued further in his art if he had chosen to go to Dresden to develop his craft in the presence of Caspar David Friedrich. At this point the German landscape painter had not yet executed any similar sunsets, but a

few years later he created the painting *Coastal Landscape in Evening Light* [5], in which the sky is entirely dominated by the reds and yellows of the sunset. However, in that painting Friedrich employed Romantic devices with greater force and consistency than Eckersberg. In Dresden the Danish painter might have gone down a similar route. But this was not to be.



[8]  
C.W. ECKERSBERG  
*Landscape with a Stile*, 1810.  
SMK. Cat. 12



## IN PARIS

The Møn paintings were the last created by Eckersberg before he set out on his grand tour abroad, which first brought him to Paris in 1810 and later to Rome. Choosing Paris as one's destination for long-term studies was unusual for Danish artists at the time,<sup>[9]</sup> but recent French art had garnered an international reputation, not least due to the work of Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), whom many regarded as Europe's leading painter. This undoubtedly influenced the young painter's decision about where to spend his time abroad.

It would seem that his encounter with French art prompted a period of artistic self-scrutiny in Eckersberg, and it certainly sparked in him a need to redefine his art. The new, contemporary French painting at the time was radically different from his Danish role models, imbued as it was by great clarity of colour, bright light and clear-cut contours, and he must have felt that Abildgaard's late mythological paintings and Juel's portraits and landscapes were all out of step with the latest French movements. This must have been quite a cultural clash for Eckersberg – almost a shock.<sup>[10]</sup> Perhaps that is why we know very little about what he actually did during his first year in Paris.

Eckersberg benefited from the best introduction to the Paris art scene he could possibly have asked for, being introduced through his patron, the chamberlain

Tønnes Christian Bruun Neergaard, who was not only personally acquainted with several of the leading French artists of the time, but also owned a large collection of drawings by many of them.<sup>[12]</sup> In 1800 Bruun Neergaard even published a book summing up the current state of art in France.<sup>[13]</sup> Bruun Neergaard introduced Eckersberg to several of the artists, and most importantly of all, he secured an opportunity for Eckersberg to study under David. The Danish chamberlain also arranged a visit to François Gérard (1770–1837), whom Eckersberg greatly admired.<sup>[14]</sup>

The process of reinvention and innovation that Eckersberg's art then went on to undergo was very much advanced by his one year studying under David. Here, the actual teaching consisted exclusively of life classes, i.e. instructions on how to paint after models. This was new to him, given that the Academy in Copenhagen had only assigned him drawing exercises in life classes. Even more important, however, was David's guidance and the example provided by his art, which contributed greatly to Eckersberg's decision to pursue a new direction in his art. David's art made his Danish fellow artist apply an entirely new view of his subject matter.

The change was most strikingly evident within the genre that was Eckersberg's true speciality at the time: history painting. Of all the contemporary paintings he

[9]  
J. L. DAVID  
*The Intervention of  
the Sabine Women*, 1799.  
Musée du Louvre, Paris

[10]  
C. W. ECKERSBERG  
*The Return of Odysseus.  
Scene from the Odyssey*,  
Book 19, Paris 1812. SMK.  
Cat. 18



saw in Paris, he most admired David's gargantuan painting of *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* [9].<sup>15</sup> It is true that Eckersberg admits, in one of his letters, that the painting took some getting used to before he was able to appreciate its qualities. Given his background and training, this is perfectly understandable. The painting presented him with a completely different way of depicting a historical scene than any he had seen before. Here the figures have been lifted out of the usual dark, indistinct surroundings that Eckersberg knew from Abildgaard; instead, David placed them in a specific setting while also aiming to imbue that environ-

ment with a sense of realism. Instead of focusing the light onto the main protagonists to spotlight-like effect, David opted for natural lighting that is evenly distributed across the entire picture plane.

During his time in Paris, Eckersberg created no paintings that rival David's picture in terms of sheer abundance and diversity. His figure paintings are almost all very clearly created as exercises in his craft. Indeed, he would hardly have been ready to handle a scene of such complexity. However, the painting *Three Spartan Boys* [11, 91, cat. 17] does reveal a certain influence from *The Sabine Women*. The subject matter itself

[11]  
C. W. ECKERSBERG  
*Three Spartan Boys*, 1812.  
The Hirschsprung Collection.  
Cat. 17

[12]

Illustration from Gerard de Lairese: *Het Groot Schilderboek*, 1707 pl. 15 (bottom).  
Etching by Matthys Pool.  
Danish National Art Library.

[13] – Opposite page

C.W. ECKERSBERG  
*Two Shepherds*, 1813.  
SMK. Cat. 24

is, quite appropriately and symptomatically, about training and perfecting a skill – the young Spartans are practising their shooting. The three figures in the foreground are arranged in a manner reminiscent of the groupings of warriors in *The Sabine Women*, and behind the Spartans we see a mountainous landscape that the artist might conceivably have observed in real life (although it is unlikely that he did). The lighting evinces a similar endeavour to introduce natural light to the scene. With such approximations towards observed reality, Eckersberg added an entirely new aspect to history

painting in Denmark. Eckersberg was presumably also inspired by the way in which landscape was depicted in David's large, as yet unfinished painting *Leonidas at Thermopylae*, which was not completed until a year after the Danish artist had left Paris behind.<sup>16</sup>

Eckersberg himself accentuated the importance of David's guidance in a letter to Prince Christian Frederik (later Christian VIII).<sup>17</sup> However, after almost a year in David's studio he felt a need to move on – he regretted that under David's tutelage he was only allowed to paint after models, never to work on his own compositions.<sup>18</sup>

## CONSTRUCTING IMAGES

Eckersberg went on to paint figure compositions such as the painting *Two Shepherds* [13, cat. 24]. The scene shows two men in an ancient classical ruin in a rural setting. Eckersberg would have wanted to draw on the experience built by his intensive life class training, and it is not much of a leap from the wooden crates that were frequently used during life classes to the blocks of stone seen in this painting. Broadly speaking, one might

describe the work as a processed figure study. However, there is much to suggest that with this painting, he began delving into an aspect that would later become a dominant feature of his artistic endeavours: the question of the construction of images. In this work he began to explore the laws governing how a picture is built up and structured. The stone blocks have been placed at different angles, reflecting his newfound interest in how to create a sense of depth by means of linear perspective, and his consistent use of sunlight and shade testifies to his interest in how scenes are lit. Both of these elements would go on to be dominant features of his art and theoretical writings. This new interest may well have been sparked by the Dutch painter and theoretician Gerard de Lairese's (1641–1711) treatise *Het Groot Schilderboek* [The Great Book of Painting], which was first published in 1707 and subsequently reissued numerous times in several languages. Eckersberg may have read parts of the book in a German translation and been inspired by the illustrations that accompanied the text. An illustration demonstrating how reflected light affects shadows [12] shows several figures grouped around a block of stone similar to the one in Eckersberg's painting, and the shading in *Two Shepherds* may be derived from the various shadows in this picture.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the first seeds for Eckersberg's later treatises on perspective were laid down here.



