

CARL CHRISTIAN CONSTANTIN HANSEN

ROME 1804 – FREDERIKSBERG 1880

Constantin Hansen grew up in Copenhagen, but he was born in Rome and baptized in Vienna. His godmother was Mozart's widow, Constance, after whom he received his Christian name. He received his first instruction in art from his father, the portraitist Hans Hansen (1769–1828). At age twelve he started in the Royal Academy with the intention of becoming an architect, but he later changed to painting. After the death of his immediate family, he became closely attached to Professor C. W. Eckersberg. Constantin Hansen was awarded both silver medals, but in 1831 and 1835 he competed in vain for the major gold medal. In 1835, thanks to funds from the Fonden ad Usus Publicos, he was able to go to Italy for further training. He lived there for nine years, mainly studying architectural and decorative painting. Together with a friend, the decorative painter Georg Hilker (1807–1875), he also studied antique painting in Italy with a view to the later decoration of the entrance hall to Copenhagen University. But during his stay he also executed several portraits and pictures of everyday life, as well as what is perhaps his best-known work, A Company of Danish Artists in Rome, 1837, Statens Museum for Kunst. Seven figures—Constantin Hansen, the architect Gottlieb Bindesbøll (1800–1856), Martinus Rørbye, Wilhelm Marstrand, Ditlev Blunck (1798–1854), Jørgen Sonne (1801–1890), and Albert Kückler (1803–1886) (plus the dog on a chair) are congregated in the Roman apartment of Bindesbøll. On a table can be seen one of Bindesbøll's drafts for the planned museum for the sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844) in Copenhagen.

Constantin Hansen's earliest works were mostly portraits inspired by his father's great exemplar Jens Juel; he often used his sisters as models. In time he specialized in architectural painting, presumably on the recommendation of Eckersberg, but he is best known for his pictures of ancient buildings. Like Eckersberg twenty years earlier, Hansen sometimes painted colossal but not immediately recognizable fragments of these historical structures, occasionally viewed from very close up and drastically foreshortened.

After returning home from his first extended visit abroad, Constantin Hansen joined Hilker in decorating the entrance hall to Copenhagen University, using a fresco technique that he had recently learned in Munich (1844–1853). In 1846 Constantin Hansen's painting Orpheus Ascending from Tartarus (Hannover 1901, cat. no. 242, ill. p. 117), which was intended to gain him membership in the Academy, was unfortunately rejected. The same thing happened two months later to Christen Købke. Both events were unjust and led to a scandal, giving rise to much discussion.

Hansen was in France, Holland, and Belgium in 1858, and in 1873 he visited Italy for the last time. In his later years he again painted a number of portraits, including group portraits. The best known is the mighty The Constituent National Assembly, 1861–1865 (Frederiksborg).

Constantin Hansen exhibited at Charlottenborg between 1824 and 1878, though he did not do so every year, and received various marks of honor and distinctions over the years. In 1854 he was appointed a titular professor at the academy, where he was the director from 1873 to 1879. S.L.

LITERATURE: Emil Hannover, *Constantin Hansen*, Copenhagen, 1901 (with oeuvre catalogue); Hannemarie Ragn Jensen, Constantin Hansen, "A 19th-Century Danish Classicist" in *Hafnia, Copenhagen Papers in the History of Art*, no. 10, Copenhagen, 1985; Stig Miss and Jens Erik Sørensen (eds.), *Constantin Hansen 1804–1880*, Thorvaldsens Museum, Aarhus Kunstmuseum 1991; Hannemarie Ragn Jensen in *Weilbach*, vol. 3, Copenhagen, 1995.