

CARL HEINRICH BLOCH

COPENHAGEN 1834 – COPENHAGEN 1890

Carl Bloch was considered the most promising young artist of his day, fulfilling its ideals to a rare extent and indeed even surpassing them. He entered the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 1849 shortly after the deaths of J. Thomas Lundbye and Christen Købke and only shortly before Danish artistic life was also to lose C.W. Eckersberg, who stood as the epitome of the Danish Golden Age. With the recognition of the advent of a new generation it was natural that great expectations should be placed on the young artists showing ability as figure painters. As a pupil of Wilhelm Marstrand Bloch learned a more relaxed and more grandiose compositional technique than was the norm in painters of the Golden Age. This included the use of two-point perspective, which Marstrand had from classical Venetian painting, and used frequently in his later work. Bloch, among others, was later to show himself to be one of the master's distinguished heirs in the use of two-point perspective.

*After attending the Academy, Bloch spent the customary years in Italy where, using Marstrand as his model, he painted a number of narrative genre pictures. These included some depicting monks in comical situations, but there was also an important work such as *Fra et romersk osteria*, 1866 (From a Roman Hostelry) in Statens Museum for Kunst. It portrays two beautiful Italian women partaking of a meal with a man who is demonstrating his jealousy in a way that confirms a northern European's notions of the Italian temperament. Bloch also early revealed himself to be an excellent portraitist.*

*However, his real ambition was to gain a reputation as a figure painter in the grand historical style. He was completely successful in this. Within the space of only two years he painted three important works of vast dimensions that awoke the unreserved admiration of his day: *Samson i Filistrenes trædemølle*, 1863, (Samson in the Philistines' Treadmill), *Jairi datter*, 1863 (Jairus's Daughter), both in Statens Museum for Kunst, and finally, the now lost *Prometheus' befrielse*, 1864, (The Freeing of Prometheus), commissioned by the Danish born King George I of the Hellenes. All bore the stamp of an overwhelming and hitherto unseen power of expression. Yet another well-known important work is *Kong Christian II i fængslet på Sønderborg Slot*, 1871 (King Christian II Imprisoned in Sønderborg Castle), in Statens Museum for Kunst. In addition to learning from the Italian High Renaissance and Baroque figure art, Bloch also derived inspiration from Netherlandish painting, of which he had first-hand experience, especially Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), who became the object of renewed interest during this period. A little later, he decorated the prie-dieu in Frederiksborg Castle chapel and contributed several major works as decorations to the great hall in Copenhagen University in *Frue Plads*.*

From 1850 to 1880 Bloch was the leading figure among the younger Danish history painters. In his youth he belonged to the group of "national" painters, but he later became one of the internationally-oriented artists known as "Europeans." His success was a beacon in this period of spiritual and polit-

ical decline resulting from Denmark's being obliged to relinquish southern Jutland and the Duchies to Germany in 1864.

However, quite unexpectedly, all the conditions for his enormous success broke down, and Bloch was not to harvest its fruits. The young artists of the 1870's rebelled against the authorities and turned to France to seek new inspiration. The artistic ideals of the time were quickly transformed, and about 1880 the "Modern Breakthrough" in painting was a fact. Almost at once Bloch fell completely out of fashion, and it was of no avail that the staunchly conservative Academy appointed him a professor in 1883. The pupils left the Academy for Kunstnerens Frie Studieskoler. Carl Bloch was not forgotten, but became the object of hate as an outstanding representative of historicism in painting. A contributory factor was undoubtedly the use he made of intense artistic effects both in motif and in colour. Nevertheless, Bloch had a large graphic oeuvre that still enjoyed respect.

E.F.

LITERATURE: Julius Lange, *Nutidskunst*, Copenhagen 1873, p. 203, 260-74; Emil Hannover in: Karl Madsen (ed.), *Kunstens Historie i Danmark*, Copenhagen 1901-07, pp. 340-47; Rikard Magnussen, *Carl Bloch*, Copenhagen 1931; Jørgen Sthyr, *Dansk grafik 1800-1910*, Copenhagen 1949; Marianne Marcussen in: *Weilbach*, Vol. 1, Copenhagen 1994.