

CHRISTEN DALSGAARD

KRABBESHOLM NEAR SKIVE 1824 – SORØ 1907

Christen Dalsgaard never travelled outside Denmark. The story of his life can be divided into two chapters, the first deriving from northern Jutland, the second from Copenhagen and especially central Zealand.

The artist was born in the small Renaissance mansion of Krabbesholm which, together with its adjoining land, was in the possession of his parents, Jens Dalsgaard and Christiane Rasmussen. Krabbesholm, now a public high school, was built in the middle of the 16th century. It looks out on the southeastern part of the Limfjord in the thinly populated north Jutland region of Salling, close to the market town of Skive. Various features of Christen Dalsgaard's upbringing presumably became engraved in his mind and made their mark on his artistic development.

He was one of nine children. Three of them died as infants and one at the age of fifteen, while a grown sister reached the age of only twenty-one. Despite the burden of these sorrows and irrespective of the fact that throughout her life the mother suffered from such a severe rheumatic condition that she was incapable of walking and had to be carried around, the artist's parents were able to create a harmonious, stimulating childhood and upbringing for the four remaining brothers.

That Christen became an artist was due to his innate talent, but he was presumably also encouraged from home to cultivate his abilities. The great hall of the mansion is decorated with resplendent colourful rococo decorations on the ceiling and walls executed in 1759 by the artist Olaus Carolus Wassman (1730–1784), commissioned by the then owner of the house, Verner Rosenkrantz, who had had Krabbesholm renovated and modernised. It is highly likely that Christen Dalsgaard's imagination derived nourishment at an early age from the array of these colourful pictures. Despite the primitive quality of their execution they are, according to one Danish art historian, a decoration of great effect containing "a wild profusion in the tracery and vitality and strength of the rococo ornamentation above the resonance of the reddish browns against the blue panels."¹

Equipped with an understanding of life and a certain artistic experience, Christen Dalsgaard went to Copenhagen in 1841 to train as a painter under a master by the name of Harboe. He was admitted to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts that same year, and remained associated with it until January 1848, for a time as a private pupil of Martinus Rørbye.

Dalsgaard was soon fired by the art historian Niels Lauritz Høyen's appeal to young artists to paint national art, in this case portrayals of the life of the ordinary people in the most outlying areas of Denmark, where the original way of life had been preserved. Further encouraged by Rørbye, Dalsgaard went home to Krabbesholm every summer to make studies of the landscapes around the Limfjord and of the local farming and fishing population dressed in their local costumes and to portray the rooms and workplaces in which they spent their daily lives. Throughout his life he preserved his collection of drawn and painted sketches from the Salling region, making constant use of them for

larger compositions, many of which were executed far later. In time, Dalsgaard bought various of the colourful costumes from the local population of the Limfjord regions, costumes which had gradually gone out of use.

In 1862 Dalsgaard was offered a post as teacher of drawing at Sorø Academy, one of the two most highly regarded boarding schools in Denmark, with a rich tradition behind it. For the next thirty years, the artist made a huge and greatly appreciated contribution there, at the same time continuing to paint his national romantic portrayals of everyday life.

Dalsgaard was not the only artist portraying everyday life in the second half of 19th-century Denmark, but he is perhaps the most important of them. His many detailed depictions of the interiors of ordinary people's homes, executed with the traditional precision and verisimilitude of the Eckersberg School, are of great historical value today. But in addition to this, his portrayals of the lives of farmers and fishers very often have a mournful or tragic undertone not found in the more directly appealing and more anecdotal depictions of rural life painted by the town-dweller Julius Exner. Although Dalsgaard was also eminently capable of painting radiant and artfully light-hearted scenes, as the writing girl in the Loeb collection clearly demonstrates, there is often a sombre mood to his pictures, possibly stemming from the experiences of his childhood up in the beautiful but bleak areas of northern Jutland with its difficult conditions of life. *Snedkeren bringer ligkisten til det døde barn, 1857* (The Carpenter Brings the Coffin for the Dead Child), now in the Statens Museum for Kunst, gives a clear impression of this aspect of Dalsgaard's art.

Christen Dalsgaard made his first appearance at Charlottenborg in 1847, exhibiting there regularly until 1907, the year of his death. The last occasion, however, was post mortem.

Throughout his long life the artist also participated in many other exhibitions. Mention must especially be made of the 1878 World Fair in Paris in which he showed a version of the Loeb collection's *Young Girl Writing, 1871*, unless it was this very work that was sent to Paris and to the Raadhusudstilling exhibition held in Copenhagen City Hall in 1901.

Dalsgaard's art is characterised by a gentle sensitivity both in the use of narrative technique and the application of colour and light. He was twice awarded the Neuhausen Prize, in 1859 and 1861. Eleven years later he became a member of the Academy. In 1892, the year he resigned his post as teacher of drawing at Sorø Academy, he was appointed titular professor at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. But the old painter remained in Sorø until his death, and it is there he is buried.

S.L.

LITERATURE: Julius Lange, *Nutids-Kunst*, Copenhagen 1873, pp. 235–59; Knud Søeborg, *Christen Dalsgaard og hans Kunst*, Copenhagen 1902; Karl Madsen (ed.), *Kunstens Historie i Danmark*, Copenhagen 1901–07; A.D. Dalsgaard, *Christen Dalsgaard, Spredte Træk og Minder* in: *Skivebogen*, Skive 1929, pp. 77–99; Arne Bruun Rasmussen in: *Kunst i privat Eje*, Vol. II, Copenhagen 1945, p. 343; S. Nygård, *Krabbesholm* in: *Danske slotte og herregårde*, Vol. 12, Copenhagen 1966, pp. 53–66; Erik Mortensen, in: *Weilbach*, Vol. 2, Copenhagen 1995; Charlotte Sabroe, Christine Buhl Andersen, Inge Bucka (eds.); *Christen Dalsgaard 1824–1907*, Vestsjællands Kunstmuseum, Skive Kunstmuseum, Den Hirschsprungske Samling, 2001.

¹Torben Holck Colding in: *Dansk Kunsthistorie*, Vol. 2, Copenhagen 1973, pp. 446–447.